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Title of thesis Shi'ism and Film: RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN Iranian Cinema

Degree DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

What constitutes a serious engagement of religion and spirituality in film remains a contentious topic in Western academia. The small body of literature dedicated to the study of religion and spirituality in Iranian cinema focuses largely on propaganda films exalting the Islamic Republic and its aspirations. My research examines ways in which other films participate and engage with Shi'i expressions of Islam. I have explored official and popular discourses within Shi'ism, and applied a philosophical framework to understand other engagements of film with religion. Moreover, I have situated the films I study within the larger socio-historical context of Iran and thereby located filmic discourses within a much longer-standing and continuing discourse on religion and spirituality in Iranian cinema.

I study the various debates by Iranian academics, clerics and critics on film's compatibility or incongruity with religion and spirituality, and examine their relevance to the study of religion and spirituality in Iranian cinema. I examine films that debate contemporary official and formalistic religious discourses, drawing parallels between these films and the discourses of Iranian intellectuals, and thereby situating them within these wider debates. In order to demonstrate the more mystical approaches within Shi'a Islam, I explore how Majidi's films lend themselves to Sufi interpretations. I also analyse how Kiarostami's films are poetic philosophies that invite viewers to rethink their existing ideas, thoughts and beliefs, be they rooted in scientific or theological approaches to religion. Finally, I demonstrate how cinema acts as a reservoir for popular, yet threatened traditions such as *ta'ziyeh*, which faces increased pressure from both intellectuals and clerics. As a medium that has received little serious attention in the analysis and understanding of Shi'i religious expressions and articulations, my study situates film as a valid and important tool in understanding many of the current debates within Iran.

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Shi'ism and Film:

Religion and Spirituality in Iranian Cinema

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The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)

Doctor of Philosophy

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little serious attention in the analysis and understanding of Shi'i religious expressions and articulations, my study situates film as a valid and important tool in understanding many of the current debates within Iran.

To the 14- year-old girl, Tahereh,

Who became my mother and whose silent sacrifices allowed me to speak today.

And to my 14-year-old girl, Pegah,

Whose patience beyond years eased the pain of deferring all the little and great things we wanted to do.

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Introduction

The Hollywood production of *Not Without My Daughter* (Brian Gilbert, 1991) became a great hit in the West, grossing around $15 million just in US ticket sales. Sally Field played the American wife trapped in Iran, whose cruel and fanatic Iranian husband, Mahmoudy, would not allow her to leave the country with their daughter. It was the sensationalist storyline and Field's presence more than anything else that turned the film into a box office success in the West. Not surprisingly, the film was never screened in Iran. The Iranian media, nonetheless, criticised it for demonising Iranian people and culture, referring to it as yet another Western weapon aimed at weakening the Islamic Republic. Mahmoudy, the real-life 'cruel husband', appeared on Iranian television to refute the claims alleged in both the film and the book. The Mahmoudy represented on Iranian screens differed significantly from his Hollywood version, snippets of which were shown on Iranian television. On the Iranian screens, the depicted victim was Mahmoudy and not his wife.

The national attention the film received within Iran, however, was short-lived. In the larger socio-political context of 1990s Iran, *Not Without My Daughter* was an insignificant incident. The country had just emerged from a long and bloody war with Iraq (1980-1988). Indeed, the Islamic Republic's social and political concerns ranged from the reconstruction of a war-ravaged country and people, to the repair of severed foreign relations, all of which far outstripped the concerns caused by the country's negative representation in a Hollywood film. Within the arena of Iranian cinema itself, far more exciting events were in the making. Mohammad Khatami resigned as the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance in 1991 for siding with

Makhmalbaf's *A Time to Love* (*Nowbat-e 'asheqi*), a controversial film that year which upset the sensitivities of conservatives of the Islamic Republic. By the end of the decade, many Iranian films were devoted to the plight of women suffering from the inequalities of living in a patriarchal society. These were films made from within the local context, and in many cases by women, and had a far greater relevance to the daily struggles of Iranian women than those depicted by Hollywood.

As I came to learn later, the image of *Not Without My Daughter*, however, proved to be longer lasting amongst many Westerners in the way it shaped their view of Iran. In 2000, as part of my graduate programme in Islamic Studies in London, I travelled to Sana, Yemen, to attend an Arabic immersion programme. The majority of the students at the programme were Americans. Many of them asked me on numerous occasions if it had been easy for me to leave Iran and if the situation of Iranian women was improving. Just as I would begin to admire their interest and knowledge in a foreign country and its women's social position, the conversation would inevitably lead to *Not without My Daughter*, as though it were the only valid and available source to understand the socio-political context of Iran and Iranian women.

This was a great learning experience for me, one that defined the direction I would later take in my studies. I was fascinated at the power of Western media and the way it continuously shapes the image of the 'Other'. Over time, however, I developed a greater interest in exploring the lesser-studied area of how these "Others" construct images of themselves. Thus, instead of looking at Hollywood representations of Iran and Iranians or indeed Hollywood constructions of Iranian religiosity, I decided to study Iranian cinema. I was particularly interested in studying how Iranian cinema,

which emerges out of the only theocracy in the world, engages with religion and spirituality. For this, I have focused my studies on the post-Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) period. The 1979 Islamic Revolution and the war that followed shortly afterward, strained much of the country's resources. The post-war period has been referred to as the beginning of a period of recovery and qualitative growth as well as a time during which morality codes were relaxed (Tapper, 2002: 8).

Academics, theologians, religious authorities and believers have defined religion and spirituality variously. However, a detailed study of what constitutes religion and spirituality is outside the scope of this research. In fact religion is often studied either as a text with an emphasis on scripture and sacred texts, or as rituals with an emphasis on the legal norms. Similarly, many of the studies on Islam, by and large, have approached it from one of these angles. However, focusing solely on sacred texts and rituals can be limiting in understanding the experiences and engagements of the believers with religion. Some scholars have therefore, argued for a cultural approach to the study of religion, emphasising the importance of cultural construction in the religious articulations and expressions. In my study of film's engagement with religion, the cultural context of Iran plays an important role in understanding Iranian Shi'i expressions of Islam. I, therefore, lay great emphasis on the development of Shi'ism in Iran and in locating its religious expressions within that larger cultural context.

In studying religion and spirituality in Iranian cinema against this background, my research revolves around the following three themes:

1. analysing diverse articulations of what constitutes religion in film both in

Western scholarship and inside Iran

2. exploring different modalities of Shi'i interpretations within Iran
3. examining some of the ways in which films participate in and engage with Shi'i expressions of Islam

The sensitivities surrounding Iranian Cinema are complex. Cinema in Iran is an industry monitored closely by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to ensure its compliance with the Islamic Rebuplic's aspirations. Amongst others, the following regulations ban all films and videos that:

- Weaken the principle of monotheism and other Islamic principles, or insult them in any manner;
- Insult, directly or indirectly, the Prophets, Imams, the guardianship of the Supreme Jurisprudent (*velayat faqih*), the ruling Council or the jurisprudents (*mojtaheds*);
- Blaspheme against the values and personalities held sacred by Islam and other religions mentioned in the Constitution (quoted in Naficy, 2002b: 36).

Considering the sensitivities outlined above, any approach to the depiction of religion that deviates from the official stance could result, at the very least, in the banning of the film or even the arrest and imprisonment of the filmmaker. Not surprisingly, most films that do directly refer to religion are those that exalt the Islamic regime and are therefore referred to as propagandist films. However, the religious discourses in Iranian films are not limited to this category. Instead, many filmmakers have creatively sought ways to circumvent censorship and engage in a different approach to religion, which may not necessarily be in line with officially endorsed Shi'i interpretations of Islam.

However, what constitutes a serious engagement of film with religion remains a contentious topic. Within Western academia, various scholars have adopted different frameworks in which to situate their arguments on the study of religion and film. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 1, the variety and range of these methods have their own strengths and weaknesses, making it clear that no single method could ever be preferred over another in studying religion in film. Additionally, since Western scholarship has focused mainly on examining Christian and Judaic elements in Western productions, it is important to fill in this gap by exploring any parallel literature on Iranian films. In Chapter 4, I critically analyse the literature on religion, spirituality and Iranian cinema and compare and contrast the various debates on these topics both within and outside of Iran. I also explore the launch of the 'spiritual cinema' category in Iran in 2005 and the various attempts by filmmakers, journalists, academics and the authorities to define this category. Subsequently, I explore some of the various ways in which films participate in and engage with Shi'i expressions of Islam.

Shi'ism encompasses modalities of interpretation that range from the communal and public to the highly personal and spiritual. These variant approaches to religion and spirituality clearly demonstrate the plurality and complexity of Iranian Shi'i identity. Therefore, in any study of the Shi'i expressions of religion and spirituality in Iran, it is important to attend to both the formal and legalistic as well as the more personal approach to religion, each of which plays a formative role in these expressions. Given the breadth of the topic and the numerous expressions of Shi'ism in Iran, I have selected three main areas within the religious discourses, namely the formalistic, the mystical and the popular, and I examine films that have seriously

engaged with these broad themes in Chapters 5, 6, and 8. In addition, in Chapter 7, I study the philosophical approach to these religious discourses and its engagement within the filmic narratives.

Clearly, the nature of my study demands an in-depth understanding of the different modalities of interpretation within Shi'ism in Iran. In this regard, analysing the formation and development of Shi'ism and its manifestations in Iran enables us to better locate more recent articulations of its deeply-rooted ideas and traditions. It is additionally imperative for us to understand the specificity of Shi'ism within the larger Islamic tradition if we are to understand Iran and Iranian film, and particularly their engagement with religion and spirituality. Chapter 3, therefore, provides a socio-historical background to some of the different modalities of Shi'ism, which will be further explored in their filmic narratives in later chapters. Situating my study within this larger context allows me to locate the filmic discourses within a much longer-standing and continuing discourse on religion and spirituality in Iran. Therefore, as a medium that has thus received little, if any, serious attention in the analysis and understanding of Shi'i religious expressions and articulations, my study situates film as a valid and important tool in the understanding of many of the current debates within Iran, which are often rooted in historical and traditional discourses.

In examining the formalistic approach to religion, I study the clerics and their centres of learning. A brief examination of the history of clerical influence within the Iranian context reveals a very complex picture, one that makes any simple reading of the situation highly questionable. Even though Iran is currently governed and led by the

clerics, one cannot point to a consensus amongst them about their own social role. Indeed, the diversity of views and understandings has turned the current debates on the role of the clergy into one of the most dynamic and exciting developments in the long history of this institution in Iran. In Chapter 5, I explore the formalistic aspects of religion represented by the ulama and their centres of learning. The films I study here articulate a discourse that differs from previous representations of the clergy in Iran.

The formal and institutional approach, however, has never been the sole expression of the beliefs and practices of the Shi'i laity. Indeed, the Sufi and mystical approach has often existed in tandem as an alternative to the legalistic approach to religion and spirituality. But those whose personal approach to religion diverged from the public and communal aspects propagated by the establishment and centres of authority, were usually regarded unfavourably and subsequently marginalised by the latter. However, their rich and varied readings of ways to arrive at spiritual maturity has influenced many aspects of Iranian culture and thought. In Chapter 6, I study the highly personal and Sufi approach to religion. Here, I analyse how Majid Majidi's films are depictions of man's struggle to spiritual attainment, a discourse that stems from Sufism, a mystical dimension of Islam.

In Chapter 7, I study the philosophical approach to religion. By the philosophical approach I mean the approach that reflects upon the various religious discourses, be they formalistic, mystical or even scientific. In this chapter I propose to study Abbas Kiarostami's films within a philosophical framework and demonstrate how they may be read as 'poetic philosophies' that both resonate with Wittgenstein's thought and

simultaneously emphasise the lyrical language of Iranian poets.

Finally, in Chapter 8 I explore how cinema has provided a new medium of expression for one of the most popular discourses within Shi'ism. Here, I examine film's engagement with one of the oldest Shi'i narratives, the death of the third Shi'i Imam, Husayn, through *ta'ziyeh*. *Ta'ziyeh* is a re-enactment of the events of Karbala that culminated in the death of Husayn. Referred to as the only Islamic drama, *ta'ziyeh* originates from much older pre-Islamic forms of performance. Being a popular discourse within Shi'ism, it does not always draw its language or facts from the official discourses on Husayn. Rather, these expressions of the laity have provided a means for personal and direct engagement with the figure of the Imam. They have also led to the creation of religious rituals, many of which have historically met with the disapproval of the clergy, and have been condemned by them as unIslamic.

Note on transliteration: The system of transliteration used in this thesis generally follows that of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES), with a few modifications to render Persian vowels closer to their local pronounciations. Thus, for Persian words, the short 'o' has been used in preference to 'u' and 'e' is used in preference to 'i'. The silent *h* at the end of Persian words is rendered as 'eh' as in '*ta'ziyeh*'. Diacritical marks have been dispensed with. Arabic and Persian terms that appear in a standard English dictionary, such as jihad, hijab and hadith, have not been transliterated or italicised and are treated as English words. Transliteration systems of sources quoted directly have been maintained. Even though I have followed *IJMES* in rendering names such as 'Husayn', I have retained alternative

spellings such as 'Hossein' where individuals have themselves transliterated their names as such in English. The spelling of proper names that frequently appear in English publications, or on official websites, for example *Kiarostami*, *Khamenei* or *Beyzaie* has similarly been retained.

Chapter 1: Approaches To The Study Of Religion And Spirituality In Western Cinema

Long before its release, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), caused a great stir in the media. The controversies included debates about the legitimacy of the long and gory scenes of torture, the anti-Semitism of the film, and breaking Hollywood norms in having the entire dialogue in foreign languages (Latin and Aramaic), thus forcing audiences to read subtitles. These debates were not limited to the film alone, and dragged Mel Gibson himself into the picture. He turned into an even more controversial figure with his Catholic background becoming the subject of detailed discussions in the media. Indeed, the general furore culminated in television documentaries that examined his life and work against the backdrop of his religious beliefs and ideas.

The anticipation rapidly building up around the film became its greatest marketing tool, and contrary to initial predictions of a box-office failure, it succeeded in earning a record $125.2 million in its first five days in theatres across the United States. Many churches bought huge blocks of tickets, reserving theatres in advance, and news reports broadcasted people emerging from the theatres in tears and comparing their film viewing to a religious experience.

The Passion of The Christ is a good example of the complexities surrounding the study of religion in film and the various criteria that could determine a film as addressing religion, or containing the religious. Would this film qualify as an appropriate example of religion in film for its depiction of a religious figure or is it,

rather, a religious film because it parallels with a certain theology, in this case Roman Catholic? Could it be studied as an attempt to shape a religious identity of one Self through demonising an Other (in this case the Jews and the Romans)? Alternatively, does it fit into the study of religion and film not so much because of its content, but because of its effect on the audience, many of whom compared it with a religious experience? Equally, could it be studied as religious propaganda that attempts to impose one sect's reading onto others? Some Evangelicals condemned the film as idolatrous, and accused the Catholic Church of using this film 'as an excellent way to convey the Catholic Christ' (Bennett and Dunbar, 2005). Furthermore, is the religious background of the director as important as the film itself in determining the possibility of exploring religious themes in film? As mentioned above, many analysed and reviewed *The Passion* by situating it within the context of Gibson's own beliefs, ideas and biography. These are just some of the various approaches by which religion may be studied in this particular film, without entering into another problematic area – that of defining religion itself.

Various scholars have adopted different frameworks in which to situate their analysis of the study of religion and film, now turning into a fast-growing field of study. Since a substantive part of these explorations are established within a Western context that examines Christian or Judaic elements in film, I have devoted much of this chapter to a survey of current Western scholarship in this regard. I will first discuss the various approaches to the study of religion and spirituality in film. I have categorised these leading studies into eight sections in this chapter. They comprise: the theological approach, the mythological approach, the ideological approach, film as religion, films with explicit religious references, the religious interpretation of

film, film as hierophany and philosophy in film. However, it is important to note that while these approaches comprise some of the main methods in the study of religion and spirituality in film, they are by no means inclusive of all the existing studies. I will introduce each of these eight categories and provide examples of how the proponents of each theory have employed their particular methodology in analysing films. I will also examine the various criticisms of each approach.

The Theological Approach

The theological approach is one of the main approaches in the study of religion in film and analyses films by drawing parallels with the arguments of a certain theology. This approach, which derives its tools of analysis from religious studies, typically explores the traditional Judaeo-Christian theological concepts in film, such as good and evil, the nature of God, redemption, salvation and grace. In discussing the theological approach, Martin and Ostwalt state that the 'basic assumption behind theological criticism is that certain films are properly understood, or can be best understood, as an elaboration on or questioning of a particular religious tradition, text or theme' (Martin and Ostwalt, 1995: 13-14). They further argue that theological criticism depends entirely on the notion that either the 'critic, director, screenplay writer, or some other creative force behind the film develops a certain theological agenda or concept, and the distinctive goal of the theological critic it to uncover that concept' (Martin and Ostwalt, 1995: 14).

Ostwalt studies what he calls 'modernity's apocalyptic consciousness' in films. He discusses the apocalyptic imagery in three films: apocalyptic character in *Pale Rider*

(Eastwood, 1985), apocalyptic setting in *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979) and apocalyptic plot in *The Seventh Sign* (Schultz, 1988). He compares the hero in *Pale Rider,* who defeats evil and restores peace in a small mining community, to the messianic figure defending the righteous at the end of time. The hellish setting of the American garrison in the jungles of Vietnam resonates with the battlefields of Armageddon in *Apocalypse Now*. And finally, the seven signs of apocalypse unfold one by one in the *Seventh Sign*, marking the end of the world, only to be stopped by the hope and sacrifice of a mother. Even though all three films base their narrative on Judaeo-Chrisitian apocalyptic imagery and folk tradition, they also depart from them 'to define the twentieth-century attitude toward the cosmic cataclysm that marks the end of the world' (Ostwalt, 1995: 56). Ostwalt argues that, as reflected in these cinematic versions, the modern apocalypse 'keeps the notion of destroying evil; however, it loses the notion of world destruction by God's hand, and it transfers the messianic kingdom from a new-age heaven to a second-chance earth' (Ostwalt, 1995: 62). Thus, by moving sovereignty from God to humanity, the cinematic apocalypse attempts to provide hope for this world instead of an eschatological kingdom (Ostwalt, 1995: 62).

It is not necessarily films with outwardly religious themes, such as the stories of the Old and New Testaments, that attract theological criticism. For example, Grimes employs this method to analyse Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). He examines the depiction of bodies, sin, debt and death in *Psycho* within the Christian tradition and, through comparing the long scenes of waiting in the film to the Christian Advent, concludes that Hitchcock has made an Advent film (1995: 19-29). Grimes argues that, in addition to addressing the fact that we are all fated to die and that death is

embedded in life, in *Pyscho,* 'Christian discourse finally shapes story into the affirmative with regard to the question, Shall these bones live?' (Grimes, 1995: 28). Estess examines the screen version of *Ironweed* (Babenco, 1987), in the context of the Catholic background of its author and screenwriter, William Kennedy, and what he calls his purgatorial vision (1995: 30-43). He reads the various stages of the character's lives as being in the state of purgatory. He suggests that Kennedy, as the author, 'views all human life, from start to finish, as purgatorial in character. Whether one realizes it or not, redemption is needed, expiation is required' (Estess, 1995: 34).

There have been various criticisms of this method. Martin takes issue with it for resulting in a narrow definition of religion which mostly focuses on films with Christ figures and Christian and Judaic theology. He considers this to be insufficient and as tending towards ethnocentricism. He proposes that approaches other than the theological are also required to fully understand the relation between religion and film (Martin, 1995: 9). The other danger of this approach is that the 'theological critic will choose these [theological] concepts as the window to understand the film's intent, even if it means discounting other dimensions of the film', and there is the danger of overlooking other social and political meanings conveyed in film (Martin, 1995: 14).

Just as this approach emphasises the character of the creative force behind the film in developing a certain theological agenda or concept, some Iranian critics, whom I will discuss at length in Chapter 4 have also argued this point. For Maddadpur, the filmmaker's faith becomes the only validating factor in film's ability to discuss

religion. Both Bolkhari and Ansari-Basir draw parallels between film's narratives and symbols and the Islamic religious texts in their analysis. Ansari-Basir argues that the filmmaker's familiarity with the sacred Islamic texts of the Qur'an and hadith are crucial. Bolkhari's comparison, on the other hand, includes parallels drawn between the Qur'an and Western films. Even though none of the approaches of the Iranian critics discussed above have been identified as a theological approach, there are congruences in their criteria for studying religion and spirituality in film.

The Mythological Approach

The mythological approach analyses how some films function in the same way as myth. Myth is the means through which religion communicates with its participants. It consists of 'stories that provide human communities with grounding prototypes, models for life, reports of foundational realities, and dramatic presentations of fundamental values' (Martin, 1995: 6). The mythical approach, thus, broadens the scope of exploring religion to include not only those traditions that fall outside the monotheistic institutions, but also those aspects of monotheistic cultures that are, strictly speaking, not part of their theology.

Calling cinema the 'dream factory', Eliade comments on the relationship between film and myth by stating that cinema 'takes over and employs countless mythical motifs—the fights between the hero, the paradisal landscape, hell, and so on' (Eliade, 1987: 205). One can learn a fair amount about religion in contemporary America by 'studying the ways Hollywood reinterprets, appropriates, invents or rejects inherited archetypes, mythic stories, ritual acts, symbolic figures, and

spiritual values' (Martin, 1995: 6). Myth criticism is employed to study the ways in which myths and symbols are evoked in film.

One of the main features of mythological films is to take audiences to 'places beyond the boundaries of the unknown and require the viewer to negotiate an encounter with "a world elsewhere," with a world that is "wholly other" and, therefore, sacred or religiously significant' (Martin and Ostwalt, 1995: 69). Science-fiction films, such as the various episodes of *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) or *Alien* (Scott, 1979), are one of the most discussed genres in this approach, precisely because of their fantastical imagery and plot, which are comparable to those of myths. Gordon analyses the first *Star Wars*, employing Joseph Campbell's (1949) definition of the 'monomyth' and its three main stages of departure, initiation and return, to reveal the film's mythical structure. He attributes the film's success to Lucas's construction of 'a coherent myth out of his pastiche of pop culture' (Gordon, 1995: 78). By situating the film within the situation of American society prevalent in 1995, which he refers to as a 'world that seems drained of spiritual values', he concludes that Lucas has created 'out of the usable past, out of bits of American pop culture, a new mythology that can satisfy the emotional needs of both children and adults' (Gordon, 1995: 82).

The mythical function is not explored solely in films with overtly fantastical stories. Nathanson, for example, suggests that Woody Allen's *Shadows and Fog* (1992) is 'a specifically and characteristically (but not exclusively) Jewish way of thinking' based on religious tradition rather than on ethnic psychology or sociology (2003: 90). He demonstrates this by drawing detailed comparisons of the character and

atmosphere in the movie with that of myth. He argues that the atmosphere of the film evokes a Central European city between the wars, a time immediately preceding the rise of the Nazi period, and the protagonist as the archetypal character of the 'legendary wandering Jew'. However, the aim of the film is not to show Europe under the Nazis, but to suggest that, even though the Nazis are long gone, 'the moral, spiritual, and intellectual abyss they represented' still exists in 1990s America (Nathanson, 2003: 92). He maintains that the film functions as a myth, albeit a 'secular myth', for it 'does for an ostensibly modern and secular society what religious myths do for traditional and religious societies. In this case, it brings viewers face to face with a mystery that lies at the core of human existence at all times and in all places: death' (Nathanson, 2003: 95).

The mythical approach has been criticised on various grounds. One of the main criticisms is the tendency to focus on similarities in various stories and, therefore, to over-generalise the contents of myths at the expense of overlooking the details in each story. The monomyth, therefore, as proposed by Campbell (1949) and Jung (1968) is criticised as an inapplicable model for it 'los[es] the distinctiveness of individual myths as well as meanings attributed to them by those who tell them' (Lyden, 2003: 62). Consequently, critics reject it as not being pertinent to film analysis. Another criticism of the mythical approach is that it 'focus[es] on our psychological quest for meaning but tend[s] to ignore the way meaning is always politicized and historicized' (Martin, 1995: 10). Doniger (1988) on the other hand, dismisses the validity of popular-culture myths for their inability to enforce a moral vision in society (quoted in Lyden, 2003: 77).

The Ideological Approach

The ideological approach to film explores how films perpetuate racial, social, religious, gender and class hegemonies. Martin argues that the primary focus of this method is 'the social and political effects of cultural expressions' in which 'the quest for meaning is secondary, and the relationship to a traditional religious figure or theme is even less relevant' (1995: 10). He further states that the main aim of the ideological critics is to understand ways in which 'a specific cultural expression reinforces or undermines the structure of power relations in a given society at a particular time' and to study the relationship of religion and society (1995: 10). Ideology in film, Miles asserts, is the 'unstated assumptions and perspectives... at work in the myriad choices made in the process of production, choices of subject and narrative, scriptwriting, casting, shooting, and editing' (1996: 81).

In analysing *Rocky* (Avildsen, 1976), Martin reads it as an ideologically conservative film within the context of the US defeat in Vietnam, Watergate, and the US economic recession of 1973. He asserts that the New Right vision of the film includes 'an attack on the civil rights movements, glimpses of a race war, and a call for the resubjugation of African Americans (1995: 126). *Rocky* (1976), written by and starring Sylvester Stallone, is the first of a series of *Rocky* and *Rambo* (Kotcheff, 1982) films that share not only the same hero, but more importantly, a common ideological objective. Together, they 'help resacralize traditional power relationships abroad and at home. They participate in and encourage the conservative cultural and political backlash against the 1960s' (Martin, 1995: 129). Martin studies the character of Rocky as the European American working-class man who stands up

against the improper power and undeserved visibility of the African Americans in the post-1960s America. In this context, Rocky attempts to restore the lost 'American Dream' and hand it back to its rightful European American heirs (Martin, 1995: 130).

Miles (1996) studies the representations of 'Others' in films such as *Not Without My Daughter* (1991). She contextualises the film within the framework of American curiosity and anxiety about Islam and Muslim culture after the Iranian hostage crisis and the 1991 Gulf War. Defining the 'Self' through the 'Other' is a process that includes identifying and excluding those who differ in race, class, religion and gender. 'Otherness must be imagined before it can be rejected, and popular film is one medium in which pictures of difference are circulated' (Miles, 1996: 68). Similarly, in *Not Without My Daughter* Miles demonstrates how the image of Iranian Muslims is constructed and how a majority is demonised as primitive and oppressive. Thus, 'in the absence of other film representations of Iranian religion and society', *Not Without My Daughter*, 'enjoyed a monopoly in circulating its perspectives on Islam and Muslims to a broad audience' (1996: 71).

The ideological approach appears to be a favourite method for those exploring gender issues and specifically the representation of women in films. Using this approach, Makarushka demonstrates how *Nine and a Half Weeks* (Lyne, 1986) rejects the gender polarisations of woman being the victim and man the victimizer (1995: 151). McLemore explores how *Blue Velvet* (Lynch, 1986) calls attention to voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia, 'foregrounding issues of representation and the construction of the subject" (1995: 139).

Lyden criticises the ideological approach employed in cultural studies, particularly that of Miles, for neglecting audience reaction and ethnographic study in the 'processes that produce the films as cultural products—in particular, how they are marketed' (2003: 28). He continues that the dominant paradigm of reading popular films primarily as ideology in feminist film theory, leftist political film theory, psychoanalytic film theory, screen theory, genre studies and cultural studies is to overlook the equally important aspects of films as 'texts' that are read by audiences (2003: 31).

As seen in the above examples, this approach is more a demonstration of ideology in film rather than a method of exploring and studying 'religion', 'spirituality' or 'the sacred' in film. Miles's analysis of *Not Without My Daughter* demonstrates how the film *ideologically* represents the 'Other's' religion. Martin asserts that critics employing this method to study 'how religion legitimates or challenges dominant visions of the social order' (1995: 7). Nevertheless, his own analysis of *Rocky* fails to demonstrate how religion specifically succeeds in doing so. He proposes that we should not limit our focus solely to ideology, for at 'its deepest level' the film 'offers a profound religious reconstruction of U.S. history' (1995: 130). However, he only provides a page on this topic, comparing Rocky to a Christ figure and pointing to the representation of power in flesh as a twist on Classical Christian Docetism, which 'put[s] down the flesh, equating it with finitude, weakness, the profane' (Martin, 1995: 131). This analysis is closer to the theological rather than the ideological approach. Indeed, Martin might have consciously chosen the theological approach for this part of his analysis of *Rocky*. However, the bulk of his analysis, which leans

on the ideological approach, has very little to do with religion in film. In fact, most studies that employ this method fail to demonstrate how the ideological approach offers a unique and distinctive method in the study of 'religion' in film and how the approach is different from the idea that popular films function primarily as ideology.

In the case of Iranian cinema, when Dabashi studies Makhmalbaf's early film career he regards it as a resistance to capitalist modernity. This approach employs the same arguments of the ideological approach – even though it has not been identified as such – in that it attempts to understand how a specific cultural expression undermines the structure of power relations in a given society at a particular time. Dabashi's approach is studied in more detail in Chapter 4.

Film as Religion

Some critics do not explore the religious in the content of the film, but consider the form and its reception itself to perform a religious function (Plate, 2003 and Lyden, 2003). Lyden, for example, does not maintain a difference between religion and culture, contending that the realms of these two areas overlap much more than scholars of religion or culture would like to admit. In this way, he suggests, the classical distinction between 'religion' and 'culture' is to be 'put aside for a more nuanced view that sees all features of culture as having religious aspects that cannot be separated from their nonreligious aspects' (Lyden, 2003: 17). As such, film as a cultural phenomenon, normally perceived as not having an inherently religious aspect, is identified as religious for the function it plays. As Plate states, 'religion is imagistic, participatory, performative, and world-creating—and sometimes it is

cinema that best provides these activities' (Plate, 2003: 2). Ostwalt argues that the movie theatre itself has acted 'like some secular religion complete with its sacred space and rituals that mediate an experience of otherness' (1995: 154).

Of those proposing this approach to the reading of religion in film, Lyden takes it furthest. He sets out to develop a method for analysing films that illustrates their religious functions. He focuses his study on popular films and claims to limit his interpretation to that of the average filmgoer. He does not 'seek to uncover hidden meanings in the films that can be detected only by the scholar who is trained in abstruse methods of analysis, but to point to the ways people's beliefs, values and feelings are affected by films' (Lyden, 2003: 5). He proposes observing audience responses as the main tool for this method and claims to have utilised them both from his own experiences where available and from other published sources. This attitude, he asserts, will help us see films as viewers do 'instead of seeing them as scholars are wont to do' (Lyden, 2003: 135). For this purpose, he divides the films under various genres of 'Westerns and Action Movies', 'Gangster Films', 'Melodrama, Tearjerkers, and "Women Films"', 'Romantic Comedies', 'Children's Films and Fantasy', 'Science Fiction', and, finally, 'Thrillers and Horror Movies', all of which he deems as popular Hollywood genres.

In discussing romantic comedies, for example, Lyden questions the ideological approach to this genre, which claims that films are created by a male industry aiming to indoctrinate women's subjugation to men. He states the popularity of these films with women rather than with men as evidence to the contrary of this assumption (2003: 180). One of the films that he discusses under this genre is *When Harry Met*

Sally (Reiner, 1989). Lyden states that the protagonists of the film, Harry and Sally, are portrayed as 'a stereotype of their gender: men only want sex and resist commitment, and women are desperate to marry and have children' (Lyden, 2003: 187). However, as Harry and Sally realise through their own friendship, sex is the least important part of a relationship. Audiences, Lyden argues, 'found this romanticism refreshing, as it shows love to be more important than sex, and sex following love rather than the reverse' (2003: 187). Drawing from his analyses, Lyden then concludes that romantic comedies 'do not tend to subvert conventional ideas about love and romance....The myth of romantic perfection is one that people seem to long for, especially in an age when so few seem to find it' (2003: 190).

What remains ambiguous in Lyden's argument of the above example is how exactly these romantic comedies function as religion for their audiences. Indeed, it is only in his analyses of children's films that he provides a brief explanation of the religious function of films. He states that the fantasies of films like *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (Spielberg, 1982) or *Hook* (Spielberg, 1991) evoke an image of the world as we would like it to be, which parallels with religion. Religion, he states, 'offers us the hope of a better world not by describing the world as it is but by describing it as it could be. In this way, we begin to believe that religions' models *for* reality could be our models *of* reality as well' (Lyden, 2003: 201).

Lyden proposes to illustrate the religious function of films. However, it is difficult to conceive his approach as being distinct from other methods for the study of film and religion, discussed earlier, such as the ideological or mythological approach. For example, when he asserts that he seeks 'to point to the ways people's beliefs, values

and feelings are affected by films' (Lyden, 2003: 5), one is inclined to question how this is different from the ideological approach. Similarly, his models *of* and *for* reality have already been extensively applied in the mythological study of religion. One way of justifying his approach is perhaps to say that the ideological or mythical are aspects of religion and in instances where films function as such, they could by extension be seen as functioning religiously. However, this is only a supplementary statement to an already existing corpus of methodology.

There are also several inconsistencies in Lyden's argument, such as his initial emphasis on audience studies and criticism of scholars who rely on textual analysis. He equates film's popularity with 'acting religiously' for a large number of people (2003: 247) but fails to explain how. He states that his interpretations of films are not 'attempts to read content into them so much as to read the response of viewers to them' (Lyden, 2003: 6). He also suggests that our interpretations should not rely on our own understanding of the film but rather the understanding of 'how the average viewer sees it, what she liked about it, where she saw it, why, and with whom' (2003: 47-48). Valid and interesting as these points are, he fails to deliver on specific details and examples in the course of his study. Moreover, as he proceeds, it appears that he, too, is unable to escape textual analysis, relying more and more on his own reading of the text. Indeed, other than a few fleeting statements generalising student opinions on films or concepts such as 'love' (2003: 187), there is no mention or detail of his own audience study, leaving the role of ethnographic study in his approach obscure. In the conclusion of his book, he briefly refers to the reason for this dearth as

> partly because such [ethnographic] studies are currently in short supply, and partly because such studies do not always tell you what you would like to know. Although it

> is crucial to listen to what viewers say, sometimes they do not articulate very well the reasons a film has affected them, or they may not even realize why they liked one film better than another. For this reason, I do not apologize for engaging in textual analyses of the films in order to better understand how they do what they do, as this is not irrelevant to understanding audience appreciation of a film (Lyden, 2003: 246).

In the study of Iranian films, form and reception have also been considered as having a religious function. Lyden, Horri and Yathribi, for example, all of whom I discuss in detail in Chapter 4, have also emphasised the role of the audience in recreating a religious experience or ritual.

Films with Explicit Religious Material

The study of Jesus and Christ-figures in films comprises the most explored topic within the literature on religion and film. This is perhaps the result of the surfeit of films produced with these themes. Just two years after the invention of the cinematograph, in 1897, two cinematic presentations of the passion play were produced: *The Passion of Christ*, also known as *Léar Passion* was produced by Société Léar filmed in Paris, and the American production filmed in Bohemia entitled *The Hortiz Passion Play* (Freeman). Following the success of the American production, *The Original Oberammergau Passion Play* (Vincent, 1898) was produced in New York a year later. This film is 'considered important in film-history and in the history of the religious film because it was one the first examples of a recreated or refictionalized version of a historical event in film' (Baugh, 1997: 9). Even the cinematic Christ-figure can be traced back to as early as 1916 in D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* with cinematic metaphors of innocent victims of human cruelty. The story of Jesus and the Christ-figure continued to be produced over the

years. In fact it could be argued that these cinematic themes were born alongside cinema itself.

Those studying the filmic representation of Jesus films propose a series of issues associated with the making of these films. Baugh notes some of the following problems: He states that the four distinct portraits of Jesus in the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John make it a complex choice for the filmmaker, who might choose one or a combination of these portraits for their filmic representation. Also, the filmmaker is challenged to reconcile the lack of suspense or surprise in the content of this story with the demands of cinema requiring a dramatic structure. The filmmaker's faith in Christianity, Baugh notes, is another vital point to be considered, particularly in matters regarding transcendental elements such as the Incarnation of God, Transfiguration, Resurrection and so on. The audience's preconceived notions about Jesus through nineteen centuries of visual art on the Jesus-theme places another demand on the filmmakers who need to take a position in the types of choices they make in rejecting, imitating or being inspired by these visual arts (Baugh, 1997: 3-5).

Tatum also enumerates four aspects of what he calls 'the problem of the cinematic Jesus' (Tatum, 1997: 6). These four dimensions of the problem are the artistic, the literary, the historical and the theological, all of which are similar to those mentioned by Baugh. The artistic refers to cinema as an art form with its own demands, as well as the preconception of the viewers about Jesus. The literary problem alludes to the various portrayals of Jesus in the four gospels, and the limited information they provide on Jesus and his outer life, with almost nothing about his motivations and

private life. The historical problem revolves around the distinction between the Christ of faith and Jesus as a historical figure. Finally, the theological problem concerns the faith claims made by a Jesus film which should align itself with the theological sources and the subsequent complications that might arise in instances where a film deviates from the scripture or Christian tradition (Tatum, 1997: 6-12).

One of the most discussed Jesus films is Scorsese's controversial *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Based on Kazantzakis's 1955 novel of the same title, it depicts a Jesus 'beset by doubts and fears about his identity and mission, constantly, oppressively tempted by evil' (Baugh, 1997: 51). There were great objections to the film even before it was shot, resulting in the withdrawal of financing by various producers, and the delay of the film's production by almost eight years. Not surprisingly, once it was released it stirred up heated controversies and protests. Baugh states that the major objections were to the long final scene of the film where Jesus comes down from the cross and enters an earthly paradise by first marrying Mary Magdalene, and in a rapid filmic sequence, after her death marries both Mary, the sister of Lazarus and her sister, Martha, fathering numerous children with them. However, Baugh does not consider these sequences as the main problem of the film, for in fact, he states, these are only 'a temptation sequence represented by Scorsese as a fantasy' that Jesus finally overcomes (1997: 52).

Baugh studies the problem with *The Last Temptation of Christ* through a different lens. Scorsese's biography as an Italian-American Catholic growing up in 1950s New York finds centre stage in his analysis. Baugh draws various interviews of Scorsese, his grandmother's Sacred Heart portrait and his expulsion from the junior

seminary because he had allegedly fallen in love with a young lady. These somehow explain the extreme use of blood and violent scenes and Jesus's persistent struggles with guilt reflected in the film. Baugh also compares Scorsese's Jesus character with his other film characters and finds many similarities between them, which he asserts 'exhibit classic masochistic symptoms' (Baugh, 1997: 63). He concludes that 'the problem is not that Scorsese does not know the gospels, or that he is totally incapable of reasoning theologically' but his 'eagerness to create a Jesus closer to his own experience, in his own image and likeness...get in the way' (Baugh, 1997: 61). However, he points that there are also theological problems in the film such as Jesus's misunderstanding of and resistance to his messianic identity (1997: 65-66).

Tatum on the other hand, does not take such a critical stand to Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ.* Instead, he states that Jesus in this film 'does eventually understand *why* he must die' (1997: 169). In his view, the controversies stemmed from the fact that Scorsese dared to do what no other filmmaker had dared to do so thus far: 'to get into the mind of Jesus so that the viewer not only hears Jesus speak, not only hears Jesus speak about what he has been thinking, but actually hears Jesus think!' and, therefore, opening up the interior life of Jesus, which reveals a 'reluctant suffering-servant messiah' (Tatum, 1997: 169).

Jesus of Montreal (Arcand, 1990) is another example of a Christ-figure film. Daniel Coulombe, the protagonist of the film, is an actor who plays the role of Christ in a passion play in modern-day Montreal and is ultimately transformed into a Christ-figure. Baugh comments that 'Daniel and his story, lived out against the background of the passion play, assume both in their main contours and in their details,

incontrovertible dimensions of the Gospel events, clearly creating in Daniel a Christ-figure' (Baugh, 1997: 121-122). Baugh further elaborates on these contours: Daniel's mysterious background and origins, his search for companions and the formation of a community, parallel those of the Jesus story. He also has a 'privileged relationship with women: they are among his first followers and they and not the male disciples accompany him to his passion and death' (Baugh, 1997: 122). The lawyer who tempts Daniel with the riches he could have if he cooperated is the corresponding Satan in the Jesus story. And finally, 'the Resurrection of Christ' is represented in 'the experience of Daniel in the new life and hope given to the recipients of Daniel's transplanted organs' (Baugh, 1997: 128).

Religious Interpretation of Film

This approach does not seek to find explicitly religious themes and images in the study of religion in film. Instead, it proposes that some films, including mainstream and popular films, which appear to have little to do with religious themes, are open to religious interpretation. May is amongst the earliest proponents of this method. He suggests that regardless of the filmmaker's reputation concerning his religious belief, the autonomy of the film as an art form needs to be respected. Indeed, for a work to be considered religious, 'one need not demand that the language of religion or theology be present in a work' (May, 1982: 31). It is thus 'more precise to speak of a film's world view as being *open* to a religious or sectarian interpretation or to appropriation for the faith experience' (May, 1982: 43). Similarly, Deacy more recently proposes that the study of religious films should not be limited to those that contain specifically religious material. Instead, he suggests, it may be 'more

appropriate to speak of the "religious interpretation of film" rather than of the interpretation of religious film' (Deacy, 2001: 18).

In applying this religious interpretation to his study of films, May suggests that we should view film as a 'visual story'. He then contends that myth and parable are 'forms of story' that are 'inextricably interwoven into the fabric of religion' (1982: 33). He thus proposes to study the religious in apparently non-religious films by appealing to the mythic and parabolic modes. These modes, he explains 'would also help both to illuminate principles that have tended toward the abstract and, I would hope, to provide further demonstration of the validity of visual story as a religious/sectarian hermeneutic for film' (May, 1982: 37). He briefly examines the religious interpretation of a few films, such as Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) and Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978). *Chinatown*, he concludes, has a mythic mode with a pattern of separation-and-return. *Days of Heaven*, he asserts, 'emphasizes the insignificant passage of man against the awesome panoply of nature's death and rebirth' (May, 1982: 38).

In a more detailed study of this approach, Deacy argues that the power of film can be recognised in the film critic's encounter and examination of 'such perennial religious themes as grace, forgiveness, alienation, the apocalypse and redemption' in popular films (2001: 19). He applies this method of study to his examination of the Christian notion of redemption in American *film noir* of the post Second World War period. Deacy asserts that even though film is a secular medium, it may ultimately be seen to perform 'a religious function in contemporary western culture by addressing and confronting fundamental issues and themes which are distinctively and

quintessentially religious in form' (2001: 20). In illustrating the relevance of Christian redemption to *film noir*, he compares the teachings of St. Paul, St. Augustine and Martin Luther about the world and human existence, with the world and human condition of *film noir*. In both cases the world is corrupt and filled with sin, and the human condition is depicted as alienated and estranged. Deacy argues that despite this seemingly bleak picture, redemption runs through *film noir*. In fact, *film noir* is a 'fertile repository' for redemption: 'As in the case of Christianity, redemption thus proceeds not from an escape from reality but from a more resolute *confrontation* with the truth and the actuality concerning the human condition' (Deacy, 2001: 54).

Exploring Christian redemption without the existence of the Christ-figure in *film noir* might seem impossible at first sight. Deacy overcomes this challenge by examining the development of Christian theology in the last few centuries. He argues that as the redemptive figure in Christian theology has shifted its emphasis from Christ to human individuals, the heroes in some of the *film noir*s can be read as the *redeemer-figure*s equivalent to Christ (Deacy, 2001: 69). Thus, even though there are no explicit or implicit references to the influence of Christ in *film noir*, the hero 'performs the Christ-like role of undertaking a process of redemption from sin, guilt and alienation, the benefits of which may be passed on and imparted to other human beings' (Deacy, 2001: 76). Deacy then proceeds with the study of redemption in various *film noir*s, with evil and suffering as the precursor to redemptive activity and the protagonist as the redeemer.

The cinema of Martin Scorsese is one of the major focuses of Deacy's study of redemption. Here I shall refer to his study of *Taxi Driver* (1976). The protagonist, Travis Bickle, lives a lonely life as a taxi driver in New York, an environment, he says, 'where all the animals come out at night—whores, skunks, pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies'. His abhorrence of this state of affairs turns into a determination to confront the sin and depravity of the city (Deacy, 2001: 113-116). What makes him a redeemer-figure and his act comparable to that of Christian redemption is his mission in fighting against sin and suffering. His encounter with the 12-year-old prostitute, Iris, provokes him to finally take action. As in Christianity, Travis's redemption is accompanied by sacrifice. Deacy compares the violence and blood scenes at the end of the film to the act of cleansing and Baptism in Christianity. In his words:

> Only by engaging with, and confronting, the 'filth' that has suffused the city can Travis's redemptive mission be fulfilled, in a manner analogous to – albeit ontologically different from – Jesus' becoming incarnate and bearing the sins of humanity in order to fulfil *his* redemptive mission...Through his [Travis's] redemptive action, therefore, there is a sense in which Travis has managed to redeem *himself,* in the respect that by facing up to and confronting the factors which have precipitated his alienation he has succeeded, at least to some extant, in *extricating* himself from the plight (Deacy, 2001: 117-118).

In looking beyond films with explicitly religious materials or themes, this approach allows for a more open way to the study of religion and spirituality in film. However, May's explanations prove inadequate in providing a solid methodology in this field. Whilst his approach liberates films from specifically religious themes, the reading of cinematic elements finds primacy in the interpretation of the films:

> In proposing that films be viewed as visual story in order to discern religious potential, I have emphasized the structure of story... certain cinematic elements seem

> more suitable than others for the visual representation of our basic concerns about the universe, others, and self. For instance, composition of frame, camera movement, and editing are most pertinent to shaping a film's world, whereas choice of physical reality, type of shot (camera distance), and mise-en-scene in general are typically more suggestive of human interrelationships or the lack of it. Finally, camera angle and cutting are usually aimed at giving the viewer a feeling for the human subject (May, 1982: 43).

May does not provide any further details or examples to illustrate how these cinematic elements provide a religious reading of the films. Moreover, his proposal to read films as religious by detecting modes that are analogous to mythical or parabolic structures adds little, if any, substance to the mythological approach. What remains ambiguous in this analysis is whether any detection of a mythic or parabolic mode in film, does, in fact, constitute a religious reading. Deacy however, takes this study further, elaborating on how films without explicit religious materials are open to religious interpretations. By focusing on a single Christian theme such as redemption, he illustrates the possibility of detecting this religious theme in popular films with no explicit religious references. Thus, by comparing the various elements of a film—such as the way the world and the human condition are depicted—to the various elements of key notions in Christianity such as redemption, he demonstrates a viable and valid methodology in the study of religion in film.

In the context of the study of religion and spirituality in Iranian cinema, as I will discuss in Chapter 4, Mir-Ehsan employs a Heideggerian framework to further argue cinema's ability to engage with religion. He also lists the inclusion of ethical and traditional values in films, such as *halal* and *haram* (the permissible and forbidden), as an indicator of films that display spirituality.

Film as Hierophany

This approach proposes that film style enables the exploration of the sacred. Eliade first proposed the term 'hierophany' to refer to the study of the sacred through the profane. He maintained that the sacred is not limited to holy places or things, but rather it is possible for the entire cosmos to become a hierophany (Eliade, 1987: 12). Bird applies Eliade's general analysis of culture and its ability to manifest the sacred, to the specific art of film. He argues that the manifestation of the sacred in film is possible not through grand religious dramas, but the medium's ability for realistic depiction. Following film theorists such as Bazin, Agel and Ayfre, Bird invokes the idea of film as an art form, which enables the disclosure of reality. These theorists argue that whilst art-as-transformation applies to other art forms such as painting, the same does not apply to film. Thus, while painting is an art only if the painter creatively transforms or interprets the reality in front of him rather than produce a mechanical imitation of an object, film does not follow the same argumentation. Instead, film achieves its purpose not by adding anything to reality but by virtue of its style, enabling the disclosure of reality. Drawing from these film theories of realism in cinema and Eliade's notion of hierophany, Bird concludes that film's style enables the exploration of the sacred (1982: 14).

Bird dismisses the ability of the so-called religious films with their grand drama and technical beauty to convey the sacred to the audience. These films fail because they neglect the stylistic virtues of the medium (1982: 13). The sacred needs to be experienced whereas these films overwhelm the very factors by which this

experience would have been possible. Creating supernatural episodes in these ostensibly religious films hinders the possibility of experiencing the sacred. Employing Ayfre's theory, Bird argues that 'genuinely religious films' are those 'in which the cinematographic recording of reality does not exhaust reality but rather evokes in the viewer the sense of its ineffable mystery' (Bird, 1982: 14). Bird also employs Tillich's (1959) argument about belief and realism to elaborate on the possibility of exploring the sacred in realism rather than in supernatural creations. Tillich asserts that contrary to the dominant notion, realism does not negate belief. In his theological analysis of culture, Tillich contends that reality points beyond itself. Bird appropriates Tillich's view of the self-transcendency of reality to elaborate how certain films in realist cinema have succeeded in exploring the sacred.

Bird identifies Robert Bresson as one of the filmmakers to have discerned the power of realism in film. He examines *The Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), to illustrate how Bresson's film style has enabled the exploration of the sacred. Bresson directs his actors to minimise their acting, and 'they pose as transparent figures through or behind whom a spiritual significance is discerned' (Bird, 1982: 17). Bird asserts that Bresson's films are an 'intensification and dissolution' of human boundaries (1982: 19). Thus, cinema is not the voice of the filmmaker, but rather 'a diaphragm which is sensitive to the speech of the cosmos waiting to be heard' (Bird, 1982: 20). By employing cinema's inherent realism, filmmakers such as Bresson enable us to hear the speech of the sacred. Quoting Eliade, Bird concludes that when cinema becomes the agent of 'the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world' (Eliade, 1987: 11), that film becomes hierophany.

Some scholars criticise the theory of reading the divine through the profane in films. Lyden refers to this approach as the Roman Catholic approach that attempts to interpret 'theonomy' in film. In his view, this method is more of a reading of religious themes 'onto' films than 'into' films. It therefore, risks 'falling into heteronomy, in spite of its concerted efforts to avoid it, by only seeing the significance of films through the ways they prepare the audience for the Christian message of grace and hope' (Lyden, 2003: 27). This approach, he concludes, would, therefore, undermine the autonomy of the films.

Bird's main emphasis, however, is that even though it is not possible to portray the infinite, it is possible to allude to it through the finite, and in this case, the film's simple and realistic style does just that. It is difficult, however, to see how this approach is specifically Roman Catholic, even if this method has so far been employed to study specifically Roman Catholic ideas and notions embedded in film. The theory of implicit references to the divine or the sacred through the profane, which forms the backbone of this argument in the study of religion in film, can be employed independent of religious denominations.

Returning to the Iranian context, Yathribi argues that the exploration of the spiritual is not attained only through explicit religious figures, symbols or epics. As I will discuss further in Chapter 4, she instead emphasises the primacy of the spiritual over the material, and cinema's ability to bring this out without referring to religious issues.

Philosophy in Film

Recently, some scholars of philosophy have been attracted to films in their study and analyses of philosophical thought. Their approaches vary from studying philosophy through film to considering film as philosophy itself. My interest in this approach is the relevance and applicability of some of these arguments to religion, spirituality and film. Falzon mentions two main concerns that might arise in the study of philosophy through film. One is philosophy's attitude towards visual images, for philosophy is concerned with the abstract and universal whilst images on the other hand are material and particular. Thus, it might be argued that philosophy is prejudiced against images as being 'remote from the austere world of conceptual understanding' (Falzon, 2002: 3). Second, from the film's point of view, the concern is that this approach might reduce film to mere philosophical examples, neglecting film's autonomy and richness. However, Falzon argues that film and philosophy are not intrinsically opposed to each other. Philosophers, he argues, had 'recourse to vivid pictorial images to illustrate, illuminate and provoke philosophical thinking' (2002: 5). And films, on the other hand, serve much more than mere illustrations of philosophical issues. Falzon proposes to study various films 'to identify philosophical positions, themes or questions that are being presented or worked through in particular films' (2002: 6). Thus, he introduces an approach which does not intend to impose philosophy on film, but rather brings out what is happening in film.

In discussing moral philosophy for example, Falzon focuses on the central question of 'Why we should be moral'. For this, he provides a range of arguments on the topic including those proposed by Plato, Kant, Utilitarianism and Existentialism. According to Kant's moral theory (1987) moral worth is dependent not on the consequences of our acts but on the motivations behind them. Utilitarianism, on the other hand, argues that the consequences of our acts determine what is moral. Therefore, even if an act produces some unhappiness it can be justified as good as long as the happiness and pleasure it produces in the world outweigh this unpleasantness. Existentialists differ from all of the above in that unlike Kant they do not base morality on reason or in the Utilitarian spirit of human happiness. The answer does not lie with religion either, for God is not viewed as the lawgiver. Instead, Existentialists argue that humans have free choice and should take full responsibility for their actions. Falzon selects particular films that deal with the question of morality in a manner that is comparable to these theories. Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989) is one such example. When one of the characters faces the dilemma of what to do with his mistress when she threatens to expose their affair, we are introduced to a number of views as to why one should be moral (Falzon, 2002: 87). Falzon studies these various perspectives, such as keeping in line with God-given moral law, the role of the conscious in people's lives and the pursuit of one's own happiness.

Goodenough (2005: 1-25) identifies four reasons for the philosopher's interest in film. One is the technical aspect of film itself, where the philosopher might be interested in understanding the technology, process, and social meanings of watching films. Another reason is that some films illustrate philosophical themes and issues.

Goodenough refers to *The Matrix* trilogy (Wachowski brothers, 1999-2003) as a series of fantasies that provide graphic illustration of a number of philosophical issues. However, since the financial success of a film is central to its production, action becomes the primary concern of the film. Thus, content is not approached in a very philosophical way and becomes secondary to these special effects. There are other films, however, that raise philosophical issues in a serious and central way. This is the third reason for the philosopher's attraction to film. These are, as Goodenough refers to them, 'films about philosophy'. Jarman's *Wittgenstein* (1993) is one such example, where philosophical thought is explicitly discussed and constitutes the main content of the film. The last approach is Goodenough's thesis of film itself as philosophy. Drawing heavily from Mulhall's (2002) arguments, Goodenough states that films are independent forms that think seriously and systematically about philosophical arguments and issues (2005: 21). They are different from and stronger than literary texts, for the written arguments and texts tell us about philosophy, whereas films *show* us philosophy (Goodenough, 2005: 21-23).

The filmmaker's intention in showing philosophy is irrelevant to the film's ability to do philosophy. Drawing from a number of arguments on this topic, Goodenough asserts that a film is not to be considered only if it conforms to any of the existing philosophical theories. Rather, it is the kind of questions that a film poses and the kind of answers that it provides, which can be of a philosophical nature, and which, therefore, make it appropriate for this kind of study. Similarly, Litch proposes to study and discuss some of 'the enduring questions within philosophy' through feature films. In her view, whether or not the writer or director of a film intended to do philosophy is irrelevant to the possibility of a film dealing with philosophical

questions. She thus states that the main criterion for the selection of films in her study is to 'present and defend an answer to one of philosophy's classic questions' (Litch, 2002: 2). For example, in her study of morality she analyses *Crimes and Misdemeanours* as one such film which presents one of philosophy's classic questions.

Goodenough mentions *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982) as another such film that demonstrates the ability to think in films. He argues that this film thinks seriously about philosophical arguments and issues, including personhood and identity. He analyses these concepts with reference to personhood as defined by Dennett and Wittgenstein. The human-made replicants in the film, who possess rationality, intentionality and linguistic ability, look and act exactly like humans. However, society refuses to treat them as more than run-away machines. 'This discrepancy between *our* intuitive feelings about replicants and this future society's provides much of the film's philosophical tension' (Goodenough, 2005: 11). A film that seriously thinks about philosophical arguments and issues should ultimately 'act as a kind of philosophical mirror, making us look to see how we see ourselves' (Goodenough, 2005: 14).

Even though this approach to philosophy in film does not directly fall under the study of film and religion, it is a method that can usefully be applied to this area of study. Both philosophy and religion, and specifically theology, are concerned with questions such as identity, human relationships with the world, the nature of evil, morality and so on. This approach, however, is different from the theological approach in that it does not aim to detect parallels between the theological arguments

and films. Rather, it detects how films themselves can reflect on philosophy, theology or religion. When a film contemplates a theme such as morality within a particular context and studies the various understandings of morality, it does not seek to draw comparisons with theological arguments. Rather, it reflects on the theological definition of morality alongside perhaps other definitions and thinks seriously about these arguments. Thus, this approach is a useful tool that opens up another avenue for studying how religion is dealt with in films. I have also employed a philosophical framework when I study the engagement of Kiarostami's films with religion and spirituality in Chapter 7.

Conclusions

As in Mel Gibson's *Passion,* mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it is clear that one could employ a number of these eight approaches to study religion in film. This would perhaps depend on two main factors: the film under study and the academic discipline from within which the scholar studies the film. What is clear from this review, however, is that there is no one method that would do justice to the study of religion in film in all its depth and breadth. In fact, one could argue that there is no such single approach. Each method, whether mythological, theological, ideological, or any of the other approaches employed on its own, studies only one aspect of film. Film, on the other hand, is a rich and multi-layered text and an art form in its own right. It is possible, therefore, for a film to have multiple layers through which religion is depicted, explored, referred to or criticised. Consequently, it is vital to clarify the specific aspects that the scholar intends to study whilst

acknowledging that it is by no means the all-embracing method. Each of the methods above provides a fruitful avenue in the study of religion in film.

My division of these approaches into eight categories is by no means an all-inclusive list. For example, it is possible to study religion in film from the viewpoint of the filmmaker's biography. Thus, one could study all of the films made by a particular filmmaker from the viewpoint of his or her belief system, or of filmmakers who share a similar perspective. However, like any other approach, this is a theme with its opponents and proponents, and is addressed in most of the above categories. In the theological approach for example, Estess analyses *Ironweed* in the context of the Catholic background of its author and screenwriter to determine the purgatory state of the character's lives (1995: 30-43). In the approach that studies films with explicit religious material, Baugh lists the filmmaker's faith in Christianity or lack of belief as one of the fundamental points to be noted in studying films about Jesus or the Christ-figures. He even goes further to suggest that the quality of the belief itself, whether a fundamentalist or enlightened belief, is of utmost importance to the film (Baugh, 1997: 3-4). On the other hand, others such as May, in approaching film as hierophany, dismiss this position in the assessment of a film's ability to deal with religion. May argues that employing such criticism is 'heteronomous because it measures the film not on its own merits as cinematic art but against the scale of "religious background" or "expressed intention"'(May, 1982: 27). Thus, even though I have not categorised the biographical approach, for it is a theme that runs through many of the already stated approaches, it could also be considered as an independent category.

Moreover, it is noticeable that many of these approaches overlap in certain aspects, making it almost impossible to have a distinct and independent methodology in the study of religion in film. For example, one could detect intersections between the theological approach, religious interpretation, and studying films with explicit religious material. As Martin and Ostwalt state, the theological approach includes understanding films through a particular religious tradition, text or theme (1995: 13-14). Similarly, the study of Jesus and the Christ-figure also draws heavily from the religious text within film. When Deacy focuses on the Christian theme of redemption in *film noir*, it is clear that the role of theology in film bears significant importance in the religious interpretation. However, even though theology is of core importance to each of these approaches, they are different in more ways than they are similar. In the same way, the distinction between the mythological and ideological approach could be blurred if one were to study them according to Barthes's definitions. Barthes (1993) categorises myth and ideology together. Following a Marxist point of view, he asserts that ideology is the product of social and economic interests and myth is a message or cultural representation motivated by ideology. In this system of study it is very difficult to separate the two terms from each other. Thus, it is important to bear in mind the fluidity of the boundaries drawn between each of these categories.

Most of the approaches studied in this chapter have been criticised by other scholars. As I argue in each section, there are more grounds for some of these criticisms than there are for others. I have also raised the inconsistencies of some of these approaches. However, my reason for doing so is not to detect faults in these studies. It is, rather, to demonstrate the various difficulties that scholars have faced in the

study of religion in film. This is perhaps a result of the infancy of the field, wherein various theories are still being tested. Despite their problems, all these approaches make a valuable contribution to the field. In fact studying them made it more clear to me that an outright rejection of any one approach is a grave mistake, for certain elements of each approach provide an opening into the study of the field that are applicable to some films and not to others, and each fulfils specific purposes.

Considering that the study of religion in film began in the Western context, it was important to examine the existing frameworks and theories before beginning to formulate my own argument. Having discussed these various approaches within the Western context and their limitations and strengths, it is also important to identify whether any of these theories are applicable to a different religion situated within a different socio-political context.

When studying Iranian discourses on religion and spirituality in cinema, which I will turn to in Chapter 4, one can detect a number of parallels and similarities, as well as certain differences, with the Western discourses.

For example, the reliance on philosophy in some of the Iranian discourses regarding religion and spirituality in cinema is evident. Interestingly, some Iranian critics have employed Western philosophy, such as Heidegger's to support their arguments in their approaches. Unlike the approach of philosophy in film discussed above, these Iranian studies are not about seeing how film does philosophy. As I will discuss later, these Iranian critics, instead, employ Heidegger's ideas on technology to study the encounter of art and technology, and of Islam with modernity. Thus, despite the

Western origin of their theories, they develop a uniquely Iranian approach and one that is rooted in a much older history of Iranian intellectuals who employed Heidegger to provide a philosophical understanding of their disenchantment with modernity and the Pahlavi'smodernising projects. However, when Dabashi, who employs Heidegger's theory of the *techne* extensively, studies Makhmalbaf's early cinematic career as a resistance against capitalist modernity, there are parallels with the ideological approach studied above. The ideological approach reads film as an attempt to undermine the structure of power relations in a given society at a particular time. So Dabashi's approach is at the same time both very similar to this Western approach (ideological approach) and at the same time particularly distinct since it is rooted within the Iranian history and discourses.

Like many Western studies, a number of Iranian discourses on religion and spirituality in film focus on popular films. As I will discuss later, amongst these are those who draw parallels between film and theology, similar to the theological approach studied above. Their focus often includes many Western popular films such as *Ghost* (Zucker, 1990) and *The Sixth Sense* (Shymalan). Interestingly, however, the parallels between these foreign films are not drawn with their corresponding Judeo-Christian tradition, as one might expect, but instead with Qur'anic verses and hadith. Indeed, these comparisons are sometimes even extended to include the ideas of the 12th-century Muslim philosopher Sohravardi, the 13th-century poet-philosopher Rumi and the 17th-century philosopher Mulla Sadra. Thus, while employing an approach (i.e. the theological approach) common within Western studies of religion in film, these critics give it an Islamic twist by appropriating or reading Islamic and Shi'i concepts within their analysis, so that

somehow Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, for example, is read within the context of surah 84, verse 19 of the Qur'an, which I will explain further in Chapter 4.

The approach of film as hierophany, even though not categorised as such in the Iranian discourses, can also be detected in the analysis of religion and spirituality in film. Just as Bird employed Eliade's study of the sacred as not being solely limited to holy places and things but applied to the whole of creation, some Iranian critics, such as Yathribi, also argue that there are filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, Kobayashi and Tarkovski who turn ordinary and living things into religious signs and creations. However, even though there are parallels between the Western discourses and that of Yathribi, she herself does not refer to these studies on hierophany, nor even use the term. Moreover, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 4, Yathribi goes to great lengths to draw the differences between what she categorises as 'Eastern' and 'Western' religious films, implying the possibility of hierophany only within 'Eastern' films.

What I intended to highlight through the examples above is the parallels that can be drawn between the Iranian and Western discourses. Whether or not Iranian critics have consciously borrowed these Western approaches or arrived at them independently is difficult to gauge, particularly because bibliographic references are not often included in their works. By 2006, however, there were over five volumes of these Western studies on religion and spirituality in cinema that were translated into Persian, including titles such as *Finding God in the Movies: 33 Films of Reel Faith* (Barsotti and Johnston, 2004), *Robert Bresson: A Spiritual Style in Film* (Cunneen, 2004) and sold at the Fajr International Film Festival desks and

bookshops.[1] In any case, it is clear that one cannot easily dismiss these Western studies as irrelevant to the Iranian context. Instead, the Iranian approaches focus on drawing out the relevance to their own context and making connections between the films they study and Islamic, and particularly Shi'i ideas. One of the main differences between these discourses, however, is the concern of those Iranian critics whose primary focus is on the congruity and relevance of the medium of cinema with Muslim Iranian society, one which did not arise in Western discourses.

My approach to the study of religion and spirituality in Iranian cinema is not based on the above categories. However, it is possible to detect some similarities between them. For example, in my study of the clergy in Chapter 5, I have employed some elements of the mythological approach. Similarly, when studying Sufism, a dimension of Islamic mysticism, in Majidi's films, I explore how Majidi's filmic narratives enable the exploration of the sacred and the mystical. Even though I do not label it as 'film as hierophany', the category could conceivably be applied to it. However, this would be different from Bird's use of the term 'hierophany' in film, where he refers to the medium's capacity for realistic depiction and, therefore, disclosure of reality. In addition, a parallel can be drawn between the study of Husayn's figure in Chapter 8 and that of Jesus and Christ-figures in films with explicit religious material. The closest of all these categories to an aspect of my study, however, remains the philosophical approach. I had already independently framed my study of Kiarostami's films within a philosophical framework before

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[1] Rezadad, the director of the Farabi Cinema Foundation, expressed great interest in my thesis and offered to translate it into Persian once it was completed.

coming across the very recently published Western studies of philosophy and film. In the next chapter, where I discuss my research methodologies, I will also talk about the relevance of some of these Western approaches to my own study.

Chapter 2: Aims and Methods of Research

Iranian cinema is the one of the few cinemas to have emerged from a Muslim country and gained significant international acclaim. Whilst this makes it an interesting and rich source of study for the engagement of film with religion and spirituality, it remains largely an understudied area. So far, other than a few brief studies, religion and spirituality in Iranian films have been examined solely within the genres of propagandist films and Sacred Defence Cinema (*Sinama-ye defa'-e moqqadas*), a term coined by the Islamic Republic to refer to films that deal with the theme of the Iran-Iraq war. My research, therefore, aims to contribute to filling in this gap by examining religion and spirituality, particularly its Shi'i expressions, in Iranian cinema outside of these two genres.

Like many PhD students, when I first began my studies I was eager to answer many unanswered questions. In my quest to uncover all that hidden knowledge and take untrodden paths, I ambitiously set out to study religion and spirituality in Iranian cinema not only within its own 'narrow' context, but also in comparison with other references to Islam in Indian and Turkish cinema. In my first year, therefore, I enthusiastically audited the Indian cinema class at university, triumphantly found and watched Turkish films and made extensive notes. It took me only a term to revisit and reconsider my definition of the word 'narrow'. It was a humbling lesson, and I also quickly learnt that 'Iranian cinema' as a general theme was too wide a topic for a meaningful study within the scope of a PhD thesis. Therefore, no matter how tempting it was, I realised it was impossible to turn the thesis into an extensive

study that covered all references to religion and spirituality in Iranian cinema from the pre- to the post-Revolutionary period.

I had already decided that I would not study the Sacred Defence Cinema, even though some Shi'i expressions, such as martyrdom, have been heavily employed in this genre. This was primarily because it has already been the subject of several studies (e.g. Varzi, 2006, Reichmuth, 2001) and I did not wish to duplicate these works. In the same vein, I have not examined the already exhausted topic of propagandist films, despite their extensive use of religious discourse. I have instead focused on the post Iran-Iraq war period (from 1988 onwards), which has been referred to as the beginning of cinema's recovery and qualitative growth as well as a time during which morality codes were relaxed.

Although there has been some research on film and religion from the post-war period (Fischer, 2000, Ridgeon 2000, 2008) this has primarily taken the form of individual articles rather than full-length treatments of the subject. This lack of a detailed study on religion and spirituality in Iranian cinema within both Western and Persian literature boosted my confidence, for it meant that I was entering a field in dire need of more extensive scholarship. More immediately, it also fulfilled the criteria of originality of research that is required for PhD studies. However, this also meant that I had to create a framework from scratch, which came with its own challenges. As a PhD student in film and media, with a background in social anthropology, I felt it was imperative to gain a thorough knowledge of film theory, which I assumed would be essential to my thesis. After having spent a year studying film theory, I was confident that even though the knowledge I had gained was valuable, it could not

drive my approach or define the framework of my studies. The best lesson I learnt from film theory experience was that it was not the only framework for the study of film.

On my first field trip to Iran in 2003/2004, I found only a handful of books that attempted to discuss religion and cinema. In fact, when I interviewed some of the authorities in Iran, including those working within the Farabi Cinema Foundation, many of them were intrigued by my research topic. The Farabi Cinema Foundation was established in 1983 as the executive assistant department of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance. According to their official website it 'started its activities based on the executive policies and methods of the IRI [Islamic Republic of Iran] cinema and continued the supportive programs in respect to the production and screening of feature films with the aims of supporting the Iranian cinema industry, giving qualitative and quantitative aids and reinforcing the cinematic activities.' (http://www.fcf.ir/english/home.asp?dbname=profile, visited 4 July 2006). By the following year, however, a new category by the name of 'Spiritual Cinema' was included in the Fajr International Film Festival (FIFF). By 2006, Farabi had published over a dozen books on this topic, including articles by Iranian authors as well as translations of Western scholarship. A new term was coined within Iranian cinema, and as I will discuss in great detail in Chapter 4, both the authorities and authors struggled to articulate a definition for 'Spiritual Cinema' and for that matter, what qualifies a film as 'spiritual' or 'religious'.

However, as with the question I posed at the beginning of the previous chapter concerning Mel Gibson's *Passion of Christ,* and as was evident from the various

approaches discussed in that chapter, the reading of religion and spirituality in films cannot be restricted to just one or two categories. Even the Islamic Republic appears to have realised that in order to attain a place in filmic religious expressions, it needs to go beyond propagandist films and Sacred Defence Cinema, both of which have failed to gain any significant attention in the world of cinema. Indeed, the very introduction of a new category of 'Spiritual Cinema' in the FIFF of 2005, which I discuss in more detail later, is indicative of a new approach taken by the Iranian authorities in this respect.

Fieldwork in Iran

In carrying out my research, I made three field trips to Iran between 2003 and 2006. During this time, I attended international film festivals, collected and studied local publications, interviewed film authorities, filmmakers, film critics, journalists and academics within Iran. All of these provided valuable insights to my research, the findings of which I discuss in the appropriate chapters.

The 10-day event of the Fajr International Film Festival is one of the most exciting times for the cinema industry, filmmakers and filmgoers in Iran. It takes its name from and coincides with the 10-day Fajr celebrations that mark the victory of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.[2] The festival not only showcases the most recent productions within the country but is also a platform to recognise the achievements of those who have contributed significantly to the industry in various capacities.

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[2] The only exception was in 2006, when the Festival was brought forward because the Fajr celebrations coincided with the 10-day mourning period of the month of Muharram.

The Farabi Foundation had kindly issued me with a press pass for two of three consecutive years (2004 - 2006) that I attended the FIFF in Tehran. Every winter, in order to gain access to the Festival, I visited the Farabi Foundation located within the complex of the glass museum in the south of Tehran and presented them a certified letter from my university that further bore the stamp of the Iranian consulate in London. I was then granted either a series of tickets or a press pass to attend the Festival. The press pass was by far the better one to receive. Each year, one of the participating cinemas in the Festival is allocated exclusively to film critics and journalists. The press pass entitled me to unlimited access to the cinema and film screenings over the entirety of the Festival. Of all the cinemas participating in the 10-day Festival, this particular cinema becomes one of the most vibrant and exhilarating places of the cinema world in Tehran.

The number of events taking place in this designated cinema far exceeded that of the screenings, which usually began around 10:00 in the morning and continued until late at night. There was a real buzz about the place. It was frequented by stars of the Iranian silver screen who turned up to attend either the screenings of their own films or the evening panels. These daily panels were not only a chance for journalists to interview film casts and crews but also an opportunity for the latter to publicise their recent works. Outside the screen hall, the conversations in the lobby and upper-level café varied from the latest legislation of the Ministry of Culture to gossip about spoilt B-rated actresses who still played with their Barbie dolls. Iranian hospitality was displayed through the free tea, coffee and numerous trays of sweets and cakes that were laid on the café counter during the breaks. The round tables in the café would quickly fill up after each screening and the sweets in the trays would fly off at

the same speed as the heated views that were being exchanged about the last screening. The fog would then begin to thicken. The no-smoking regulation that applied to all Iranian cinemas was constantly flouted during this 10-day period in this particular cinema or, to be more precise, it was very difficult to enforce.

Looking back now, I have to admit that, despite suffering constant headaches, I found that the heavy smoke in the old and unrenovated cinema building actually gave the place a particular charm, just as did the crowd of journalists frequenting the cinema hall, sporting balmoral hats and long overcoats that had once again become fashionable in 2006 Tehran. Tehran's infamous air pollution outside the downtown cinema was not much of an alternative to my passive smoking inside the cinema hall during the breaks. In any case, I preferred to stay inside and mingle with all these people who seemed to be incredible sources of information. I conducted interviews with some of the directors in the cinema lobby, such as Farhad Asghari and Ramin Mohseni. I also had many informal chats with journalists, critics and Farabi insiders, all of whom shared their information and insights with me. My press pass also gave me access to the film market, held each year in conjunction with the festival. The film market provides an opportunity for Iranian producers to present and publicise their latest productions. Here, I met those involved in the production and distribution of the films, and also came across filmmakers such as Bahman Farman Ara, who welcomed me at his table in the café of the film market, and answered my questions.

From the beginning, however, it was clear that I was an outsider when attending the festival screenings in the designated cinema, for not only was I the only person whom nobody knew initially, but I was also too tall for an Iranian gathering to

simply disappear in the crowd and become the proverbial fly on the wall. I later discovered, to my amazement, that I had provoked all sorts of gossip about my identity, including the notion that I was half-Iranian and half-German. At least the half-British rumour was more plausible, considering that I was visiting from London. Even though I explained that I was not 'half-' but 'fully-' Iranian, I was still perceived as an outsider, unfamiliar with many aspects of Iranian life and culture.

As an Iranian woman who then, as now, lived in the UK but who had studied and worked extensively in Iran, I had overestimated the ease with which I would undertake my research in Iran. I had already accounted for the usual discourse of the insider/outsider in my research plan, where I would be an insider in terms of belonging to that culture, but an outsider for having lived abroad long enough to take notice of facts that are otherwise taken for granted by insiders. In stark contrast to my previous experiences of living in Iran, many of the people I encountered viewed me as an outsider. Moreover, I had to struggle to find my way in a male-dominated field. Thus, even though I had placed myself as an insider in relation to my own culture and background in my initial research plan devised in London, I was clearly viewed otherwise.

To my surprise, I discovered that I was indeed an outsider for reasons I had not previously considered. The discovery of the fact that I no longer fully 'belonged' to that context came to me as a painful shock. The context in which I arrived had changed from the image I had nostalgically frozen in my memory. I no longer had *my* place of work, *my* neighbourhood, nor all of the previous kinship networks in which I had located myself. I had resigned from my job, moved out of my

neighbourhood, and as happens in many divorces, severed some of my familial relationships. To put it briefly, I was an Iranian who had lived away long enough to notice in the encounter with my 'local' context that both I and the context had changed. The context was certainly familiar, but no longer 'mine'. The familiar had the uncanny ability to make me feel like a stranger at times. I thus had to revisit the initial assumptions based on my previous knowledge and experience, and rework my plans to fit the changed realities of the field.

And so, I learnt to live with the perceptions of those around me, to whom I was an outsider, unfamiliar with my own history and culture. Many of them, particularly the journalists, felt obliged to explain basic religious concepts to me. I formed a longer friendship with a few journalists, because I would see them throughout the festival. Some would even ask rather personal questions of faith, such as whether or not I performed, or even knew, my daily prayers. As such, I resolved to continue to focus on my research rather than try to convince others of my roots and cultural knowledge. I, therefore, politely accepted their attempts at explaining the 'Iranian ways' to me, and particularly certain 'religious concepts' (such as the occultation of Mahdi, the twelfth Shi'i Imam), in the same way that they politely tried to accept my 'odd' choice to study Iranian cinema in London.

Additional Research Methods and Source Materials

My fieldwork was not restricted to Iran. With the many international film festivals, conferences and cultural events held in the UK, I was fortunate to gain access to many Iranian filmmakers who had travelled abroad. For example, in late 2004, I

heard about a London-wide programme of events entitled *Abbas Kiarostami: Visions of the Artist*, which aimed to 'celebrate the achievements of this artist and his impact on contemporary culture and society both inside and outside Iran' (festival booklet). These events were organised by the Iran Heritage Foundation in collaboration with some of the UK's leading national institutions including the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), the National Film Theatre (NFT), Channel 4, the London Film School, the French Institute and the British Film Institute (BFI). The events included installations, photographic exhibitions, a Kiarostami film retrospective, film workshop and conference, as well as publications, DVDs, various interviews and in-conversations.

These events, which were held between 27 April and 19 June 2005, provided an unprecedented and unique access to Kiarostami's collection of works. I could not believe my good fortune for having all this research material and the potential access to Kiarostami at my doorstep, particularly because my fieldtrips to Iran had coincided with his travels abroad and I had not been able to meet him. The Kiarostami events in London, therefore, proved an excellent opportunity to obtain data, certainly far more than what would have been possible through a formal or even semi-formal interview with him. I also participated in a 10-day film workshop led by Kiarostami, himself, during which time I was able to engage in a series of conversations with him during the breaks and after class. Much of my approach to his films in Chapters 7 and 8 has been informed by this experience.

The Historical Approach

Like Western cinema, Iranian cinema, too, is a product of its context. As such, the historical approach is an important aspect of the grounding of my research. Iran is currently not only the sole theocracy in the world, but also the only Muslim country with an overwhelming majority of around 90% of its population being Shi'as. Having said this, it is important to note that Shi'ism is not a monolithic religious tradition. Rather, there are different modalities of interpretation within Shi'ism itself. These include not only its communal and public aspects but also a highly personal and spiritual approach with many Sufi components. It is clear, therefore, that the Iranian context differs from that of the Judaeo-Christian West and thus requires an in-depth analysis of the formation of Shi'ism and its many manifestations in Iran so as to better understand recent articulations of its deeply-rooted ideas and traditions.

In order to understand Iran and Iranian films and particularly their engagement with religion and spirituality, it is imperative to understand the specificity of Shi'ism. I, therefore, study the importance of the early Shi'i Imam, Husayn, in the formation of Iranian Shi'i identity, the religious authorities and institutions in Iran, as well as the mystical dimension of Islam as expressed in Sufi literature. These themes are examined in a whole set of films I have demarcated for my study. Thus, whether it is the more formalistic aspects of religion such as the ulama and their centres of learning (madrasas) discussed in Chapter 5 or the more mystical and personal approach to religion explored in Chapter 6, the historical context plays an important part in my research.

The next chapter, on Shi'ism in Iran, is meticulously devoted to this socio-historical context as an important framework within which I locate my research. One of the strengths I bring into this study is my background in Islamic Studies. Prior to my Masters degree in Anthropology of Media, I had completed a two-year graduate programme in Islamic Studies and Humanities, which had equipped me with the skills required for this research. Importantly, the historical method used in my studies is not a mere research tool. Rather, it allows me to locate the filmic discourses within a much longer-standing and continuing discourse on religion and spirituality in Iran. Therefore, as a medium that has thus far received little, if any, serious attention in the analysis and understanding of Shi'i religious expressions and articulations, my study situates film within the larger and more conventional sources as a valid and important tool in the understanding of many of the current debates within Iran, which are often rooted in the historical and traditional discourses.

Source Materials

My research data also expanded to comprise both Persian and English sources. Being a native Persian speaker, I had access to a wide range of primary sources, which I studied as my research data. These included texts such as religious treatises, academic publications, journals and film magazines as well as interviews with various people. Almost all of my primary sources have so far been unavailable in English translation. As part of this study, therefore, I have translated large sections of these sources and thereby bridged a key gap between internal Iranian discourses on cinema and Western academia. These discourses have until now remained

inaccessible to English-speaking audiences and have, therefore, often been overlooked. In Chapter 4, for example, where I discuss Iranian discourses on religion and spirituality in film, my analysis draws from the treatise of an Ayatollah, wider Iranian scholarship, and authoritative newspaper and magazine articles, most of which are published only in Persian.

Internet-based sources

Persian websites also proved a significant resource that enabled me to keep abreast of developments within Iran generally and its cinema world in particular. Moreover, they provided a medium by which I could access alternative debates on various issues and films. This polyvocality of views proved to be far more difficult to achieve through interviews, particularly on topics that were deemed sensitive, such as religion. In fact, the relative anonymity that the Internet allows its users provides a far more open discussion than is sometimes possible through interviews, especially because interviewees are often concerned about formally articulating opinions that might jeopardise the positions and careers they hold.

I used the Internet not just as a resource to access primary data within Iran. Reviews of Iranian films found on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) website, self-styled as 'the Earth's Biggest Movie Database', enabled me to gauge the international access and reception of these films within a wider context. The user reviews and availability of DVDs on online retail sites such as Amazon were similar indicators of the international scope of the audiences and the distribution of particular Iranian films.

In Chapter 6, I draw my data for analysing and comparing the international success of the Iranian filmmakers Majidi and Beyzaie from the IMDb film reviews.

The Internet also provided me with other sources of research data. Podcasts available on the Persian BBC website, for example, allowed me to record and analyse some of the latest music productions that inform my study on the commemorations of Muharram discussed in Chapter 8. I have also used the video postings on YouTube as research material. To this end, the video footage discussed in Chapter 8 of a cleric delivering sermons about the rites and rituals of Muharram, provides a fascinating insight into the changing attitudes of the local authorities on such commemorative rituals in particular and the official Iranian Shi'i practices in general.

Film analysis

As my research is the study of film, I have, of course, extensively employed film analysis throughout this thesis. I have also examined the filmmakers' backgrounds in my analysis, referring to the larger body of their works and how they relate to my study. Where relevant, I have also discussed the reception of the films both nationally and internationally for a more detailed examination of the films and their role in society. My analysis furthermore locates the films within the socio-historical context of Iran discussed in Chapter 3. I, therefore, discuss the tradition(s) from which the films emerge and their engagement with and participation in current debates on religion and spirituality in Iran. These debates are variously rooted in what may be loosely categorised as the theological, philosophical and intellectual approaches to religion. Although it is impossible to delineate these interconnected

approaches, a certain leaning towards one or another is evident in each of the filmic discourses that I study, and which may be usefully teased out for a better understanding of these debates. For example, I employ Kant and Wittgenstein in my analysis of Kiarostami's films, thereby positioning a theoretical framework that does not appear to have been used before in the study of his films. My analysis also draws the connection between film and other media, such as the performing arts of *ta'ziyeh* discussed in Chapter 8.

Relevance of the Western Approaches to the Iranian Context

I have discussed in the previous chapter the various approaches to the study of religion and spirituality in film within the Western context as well as their strengths and limitations. However, it is important to examine whether these theories are applicable to a different religious tradition situated within a very different socio-political context. Again as I have already outlined earlier, as my research progressed and my analysis evolved, I found that there were, in fact, echoes of these approaches in my own studies.

However, there are also stark contrasts with some of the approaches studied within a Western context and their applicability to the Iranian one. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter, some scholars such as Lyden (2003) suggest that the very experience of going to the movies itself is akin to a religious ritual. The dark cinema space and the communal participation of huge numbers of viewers who attend popular screenings, he argues, is like participating in a religious act.

The Iranian context, however, does not at all conform to this definition of viewing a film in a cinema hall. This is partly because Iranian cinema screens do not provide the same experience as their Western counterparts. Not only is there a low number of theatres throughout the country, but also 'the undesirability of theatre locations, the bad conditions of halls and projection systems, the low quality of many of the films exhibited and the demographics of spectators, who are predominantly young, unmarried and unemployed men who sometimes heckled women', (Naficy, 2002b: 38) has turned them into a less than popular experience.

In my own field trips to Iran, I also visited many ordinary cinema halls to view the latest screenings. I was shocked at the tolerance of loud mobile phone conversations and the noisy cracking of nuts (the Iranian equivalent of popcorn) at some of these screens. In addition, the Islamic morality codes enforced within the country also stipulate that the lights within the cinema halls cannot be completely turned off, so as to prevent any immoral behaviour during the screenings; indeed, a staff member with a torch walks around the hall to ensure that no such acts take place. Clearly, the physical conditions of a cinema and the corresponding experiences of cinemagoers in Iran are significantly different from that in the West, and certainly do not lend themselves to a communal religious experience.

Conclusions

In conducting my research, I employ a wide range of source materials in different languages as well as media (oral, written, film, music, Internet), and encompassing both traditional and modern. My study is thus informed and enriched by materials

ranging from Qur'anic verses and treatises of Ayatollahs to histories of the Safavids and Mongols, and from the philosophy of Wittgenstein to Iranian underground rap music.

I should also note that my study of the available literature is also not a mere collection and review of data. In the first chapter, I have synthesised and categorised the various approaches to the study of religion and spirituality in Western scholarship and critically examined them afresh. Similarly, in discussing the socio-historical context of Iran, the chapter that follows is more than a simple recounting of historical facts and events. Rather, it is a critical synthesis of the emergence and development of Shi'ism in Iran.

In choosing to study the variety of expressions of Shi'ism, one of the primary challenges I faced was to examine very divergent fields of study, each of which could become a PhD thesis in their own right. This became very demanding as I employed Islamic history, Islamic mysticism, Iranian performing arts and Western philosophy as part of my research.

The next chapter will explore the historical background of the three Shi'i themes that I have chosen to study in film in order to situate my studies within the larger socio-political context of Iran. It will examine the development of Islam and particularly Shi'ism in Iran and how its religious traditions have evolved within its particular cultural and historical milieu.

Chapter 3: Socio-historical Background of the Iranian Context

This chapter provides a historical background to the themes to be discussed in the forthcoming chapters. In the first section, I explore the appeal of Shi'ism in Iran during the early Islamic period. Most studies conventionally trace the significance of the Shi'a in Iran back to the Safavids in the early 16th century. However, as I argue, the Shi'a role and influence in Iran stretches back to the formative period of Islam. I proceed to discuss both the role and development of the clergy after the establishment of the Safavid Shi'a state in Iran as well as that of the Shi'a madrasas, which constitute the formal and institutional facets of Shi'ism. In the next section I study some of the more personal approaches of Shi'as to Islam by focusing on mysticism. Finally, I examine the various approaches to commemorating the death of Husayn, the third Shi'a Imam, who is fundamental to Shi'i Iranian identity. The figure of Husayn and particularly his death in the 7th century have attracted both the laity's imagination and the clergy's attention. This has allowed for a more personal approach to religion through the laity's expressions as well as the more formalistic articulations of the clergy.

The appeal of Shi'ism in Iran and the foundations of Twelver Shi'ism

Disagreements surrounding the Prophet Muhammad's succession upon his death in 632 in Medina marked the beginning of what was later to be referred to as the Shi'a-Sunni split. A few of the Companions of the Prophet elected Abu Bakr as successor, who thus became the first of the four 'Rightly Guided' caliphs. It has been argued, however, that 'Abu Bakr's succession was realized neither through a free election in

any sense of the term nor through a free choice of the community' (Jafri, 1979: 49). Indeed, a small group of Muslims regarded 'Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet, as the rightful successor to the Prophet. They believed that 'Ali was best qualified for the position and they thus 'became generally designated as the *Shi'at 'Ali*, "party of 'Ali" or simply as the Shi'a" (Daftary, 1998: 23). The dispute between the upholders of 'Ali's right to the caliphate and the supporters of Abu Bakr 'centred on considerations of *what is necessary under the circumstances,* and *what ought to be*' (Jafri, 1979: 50), with the Shi'a being of the latter opinion.

Development of Shi'ism in the early Islamic period

It is one of the fundamental beliefs of the major Shi'a groups that the Prophet Muhammad himself 'had designated 'Ali as his successor, a designation or *nass* instituted through divine command and revealed by the Prophet at Ghadir Khumm shortly before his death' (Daftary, 1998: 23). The Sunnis maintain that since the Qur'an refers to Prophet Muhammad as the 'Seal of the Prophets' (33: 40), this means that 'he was not to be succeeded by any of his family according to God's design', but that Muhammad had left his community to decide on this matter based on the Qur'anic notion of *ijma'* or consultation (Madelung, 1997: 17). The Shi'as, however, defend the doctrine of the imamate and assert that since the Sunni caliphs succeeded the Prophet in every aspect other than his prophethood, this status was befitting of his family. They, too, refer to the Qur'an and the examples of the earlier prophets mentioned therein to support their arguments.

> In the Qur'an, the descendants and close kin to the prophets are their heirs also in respect to kingship (*mulk*), rule (*hukm*), wisdom (*hikma*), the book and the imamate...the Qur'an advises the faithful to settle some matters by consultation, but

> not the succession to the prophets. That, according to the Qur'an, is settled by divine election, and God usually chooses their successors, whether they become prophets or not, from their own kin (Madelung, 1997: 17).

'Ali was passed over two more times upon the deaths of the first and second caliphs. He was finally appointed as the fourth caliph in 656 but his rule ended with his murder four years later. This marked the establishment of the Umayyad caliphate (661-750) and the beginning of the dynastic caliphate in Muslim history. For the Shi'as, however, 'Ali's role as imam, or spiritual leader, was a divinely designated role that began upon the death of the Prophet, independent of his political role as caliph and quite aside from the issue of the three caliphs before him having unjustly 'usurped' this position. For the early Shi'a, it was the protest against the Muslim majority who ignored this designation that separated the partisans of 'Ali from the rest of the Muslim community (Daftary, 1998: 24). The revolutionary aspect of the Shi'as is, therefore, sometimes traced to the very beginnings of the formation of Islam.

The expansion of the Muslim Empire began with the rule of the second caliph, 'Umar. The Muslim armies conquered many of the Near Eastern lands including territories of the Persian Empire in 636/637. The Arab conquerors were not as keen on imposing their religion on their new subjects as they were on imposing the *jizya*, a poll tax on each non-Muslim male adult, for the revenues they brought in. As with most of the other conquered territories, very soon most of the Persians had also converted to Islam. However, they remained the only occupied land at that time to have been Islamicised but to have nevertheless resisted Arabisation.

The dissatisfaction of the various factions within the Umayyad empire contributed greatly to its fall in 750. The people of Khurasan, in Eastern Iran, were one such group frustrated at their loss of status and the imposition of unjust taxes. The Abbasid propagandists launched their revolt against the Umayyads 'in the name of the *ahl al-bayt* [the family of the Prophet] with much appeal to the Shi'a and the Persian *mawali* [non-Arab Muslims]' (Daftary, 1998: 31). They claimed familial legitimacy through their ancestor Abbas, the Prophet's uncle, and won the support of many Shi'as. As such, the Abbasids succeeded in gaining military support amongst the disgruntled population of Khurasan, which also had Shi'a sympathies. The Shi'a supporters were nevertheless left bitterly betrayed when the Abbasids aborted their Shi'a position upon coming to power. Instead they established a Sunni caliphate and disavowed any support for Shi'a belief.

The relations between the Abbasid state and Shi'ism were problematic. For a brief period, there was hope of a reconciliation between the Sunni caliphate and what came to be known as Twelver Shi'ism (the majority group within Shi'as who believe in a line of twelve imams) when the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun (r. 813-833), appointed the eighth Imam, 'Ali al-Rida as his heir. However, when al-Rida accompanied Ma'mun from Marv to Baghdad, he died under peculiar circumstances, 'poisoned at the caliph's orders, say a number of sources' (Berkey, 2003: 133). The situation became even harder for the later imams, with the tenth and eleventh living under house arrest in Samara. The Abbasids 'cultivated rivalries within the family of the 'Alid Imams as a way of weakening the potential influence of any one claimant' and even went as far as assigning midwives to monitor their wives for any potential pregnancies (Berkey, 2003: 133-134).

Things took a different turn for proto-Twelver Shi'ism with the death of its eleventh imam, Hasan al-Askari, around 874 when he was only 29. Various theories arose around the succession to him, particularly because there were doubts as to whether he had left any heirs or not. Finally, however, the accepted theory was that he had indeed left a five-year-old heir, Muhammad, who was the twelfth imam but had gone into occultation. The period of his occultation has been divided into two main periods – *ghaybat al-soghra* and *ghaybat al-kobra*, the minor and the major occultations respectively. The minor occultation lasted until 940, during which time the Imam is believed to have communicated with his followers through his *safir*s (intermediaries) also referred to as *wakil*s (trustees) or *bab*s (gates), each appointed by the previous *safir*. His major occultation started with the death of the fourth *safir*, 'Ali al-Samarri in 940/941. Unlike his predecessors, he did not appoint a successor, stating six days before his death that the imam himself had dictated a letter to him asking him not to designate a successor (Richard, 1995: 40-42; Halm, 2004: 33-37). To this day, the Twelver Shi'a await their hidden imam to manifest himself.

The Iranian influence

From the very early days of the Islamic empire—both during the Umayyad and, later, the Abbasid caliphates—many Persian elements were employed in the court. During the reign of the Umayyad caliph Hisham (724-743),

> Persian court procedures were adopted, and the first translations of Persian political documents were made. Under the 'Abbasids, Persian scribes, merchants, workers, and soldiers saw to the translation of Persian manuals of behaviour and protocol (*adab*) for scribes and administrators into Arabic. The manuals contained advice on how to conduct affairs of state, carry out duties of various offices, and behave in the

presence of rulers, and described the qualities required for different positions (Lapidus, 2002: 76).

Arabic, however, became the dominant intellectual language of the Islamic lands, which included Iran, and it was thus that the Persian language went 'silent' for about 200 years. It was only in the 10th century that, in an attempt to revive the Persian language, Persian scholars once again began writing in the vernacular (Mottahedeh, 1985: 156-157; Lapidus, 2002: 127). Ferdowsi's (d. 1020) masterpiece, the *Shahnameh,* a national epic that took him over 30 years to write, was a seminal work in this period. Similarly, other Persian authors chose to write their travelogues, works of philosophy, astronomy and theology in Persian. To name a few, one can mention Nasir-e Khusraw (d. after 1072), Ahmad Nasafi (d. 943), Abu Rayhan Biruni (d. 1048) and Khwaja Abdullah Ansari (d. 1088). This trend continued in the works of later scholars such as the philosopher, poet and astronomer, Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 1274). This phenomenon has been seen as a resistance movement that began as a Persian response to the Arabisation of Islam—a movement that was concerned with the preservation and protection of Persian culture and identity.

It was also around the 10th century that Shi'i revivals are witnessed in Iran. By then, the Abbasid empire was fragmented and had lost much of its direct control over the peripheral areas of its extensive territories. This resulted in the emergence of various dynasties in these regions. The Shi'i Buyids from the Caspian province of Daylam in Northern Iran are one such dynasty. They rose to power and ruled much of the central provinces of the Abbasid empire during the 10th – 11th century. In 945, they entered Baghdad, the seat of the Abbasid caliphate, but decided against overthrowing it. The Buyid ruler, Mu'izz al-Dawla, 'was aware that the Shi'is were in minority,

and that, had he destroyed the Caliphate in Baghdad, the institution would have reappeared elsewhere. It was better to keep it under his thumb, both to legalise his authority over the Sunnis in his states and to strengthen his diplomatic relations with the world outside by the weight of the respected moral authority which the Sunni princes still enjoyed by right' (Cahen, 2008). The Buyids ruled until 1055 and it was under their patronage that Twelver Shi'ism 'began to take a more explicit doctrinal form' (Berkey, 2003: 115).

The establishment of the Shi'i Ismaili Fatimids in North Africa in 909 had also attracted a following, even if small, in the Iranian lands. Following the crisis of the Fatimid leadership in 1094 the Ismailis split into two groups, the Musta'lis and the Nizaris. The insurgency of the Nizari Ismailis against the Sunni authorities appealed to many Iranians. The Nizari Ismailis, under the leadership of Hasan-e Sabbah, based their headquarters in Iran. They took over many fortresses including the impregnable castle of Alamut, south of the Caspian Sea, which was to become the centre of their religio-political activities. 'At the direction of Hasan, the Ismailis of Iran launched a scattered but vigorous revolt against the Saljuq regimes that dominated the Iranian world in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries....The "Ismaili revolt" was dramatic and, for a time, posed a serious challenge to the Sunni political order, and especially to the various Saljuq regimes' (Berkey, 2003: 193).

There are various reasons for the attraction of the Iranian population to Shi'ism. For one, many scholars have alluded to the connections between the Shi'a form of Islam and the Iranian context. Indeed, the divinely designated leadership of the Shi'i imams was similar to the familiar kingship model of the pre-Islamic Sassanid

Empire, itself also based on the idea of a divinely ordained ruler. The imperial ideology of the Sassanids espoused the idea of a God-King, in which the kings were not only supported by Ahura Mazda, the Good God, but also claimed divinity for themselves (Kennedy, 1986: 7). The kingship was restricted to a single lineage and the king's right to rule was sacral and divinely ordained (Choksky, 2008). Thus, the Shi'a idea of a divinely guided and divinely appointed leader was probably more amenable to the Iranians who were familiar with this leadership paradigm. Indeed, Aslan traces the early attraction of Iranians to Shi'ism to the time of the death of 'Ali, the first Imam. He states that even though the *Shi'at 'Ali* were few, they were 'still an influential faction, particularly among the Iranians of the former Sasanian Empire, who saw in the ahl al-bayt an alternative to the ethnic Arab domination of the Umayyads' (Aslan, 2006: 174).

Many scholars have also attributed the Shi'i revolts popular in Iran more to national rather than religious sentiments. Thus, the Shi'i supporters of the Abbasids are seen as motivated by nationalist reactions to the ruling Arabs. The Abbasid dynasty, in turn, adopted an imperial ideology by not only claiming familial relations with the Prophet but also promulgating the view that it was 'the successor of the ancient imperial dynasties in 'Iraq and Iran, from the Babylonians through the Sasanians, their immediate predecessors. In this way they were able to incorporate Sasanian culture, which was still the dominant culture of large masses of the population east of 'Iraq, into mainstream 'Abbasid culture' (Gutas, 1998: 29). Similarly, the Nizari Ismaili movement is seen as a reaction against the ruling Saljuq Turks. 'Less conspicuously, Hasan's revolt was an expression of Persian "national" sentiment – a

factor that accounts for its early popular appeal and widespread success in Persia' (Daftary, 2007: 316).

With the continuing persecution of the Twelver imams, particularly during the Abbasid caliphate and the occultation of the twelfth imam, the Shi'as had settled for a quietist policy. In the 13th century, the Mongol invasion of the Islamic lands was followed by large-scale murder and plunder. The Nizari Ismaili state in Persia came to an end in 1256 with the fall of Alamut to the Mongols. Two years later, in 1258, the Mongols conquered Baghdad and abolished the Abbasid caliphate. 'When they arrived, the Mongols practiced a religion ... commonly labelled "shamanism", which is to say they did not embrace any of the universalist, and generally monotheistic faiths which had emerged from the ancient Near East' (Berkey, 2003: 182). However, one of the 'major and far-reaching consequences of the Mongol policy of religious diversity was the gradual erosion of some of the tensions that had previously divided various religions and sects under the Saljuqs' (Jamal, 2002: 85).

As a result, following a long period of persecution and quietism, Twelver Shi'ism finally found favourable ground, even if inadvertently, under the Mongols. Two of their main rivals—the Sunni Abbasids and the Nizari Ismaili Shi'as—were eliminated and the policy of relative religious tolerance gave them a new-found scope of activity. The famous Twelver Shi'i scholar, Allam-e Hilli, moved to Persia in 1305 and even converted the Mongol ruler Oljeytu who had previously converted from Shamanism to Christianity and later to Sunni Islam before becoming a Shi'a. Subsequently, even though

> Sunnis remained the majority in Persia and continued to dominate its major urban centres for several centuries, there was a gradual resurgence of Twelver Shi'ism

> which was allowed, for the first time, to organise and express itself openly without the fear of persecution.... At the same time, there is evidence of a general movement away from Sunnism to Shi'ism during the Mongol period. According to Bausani, these people sought refuge in Shi'ism because they were disgusted with the squabbles among the different Sunni schools, and especially as regards Iran, between the Shafi'ites and the Hanafites (Jamal, 2002: 85).

The dominance of Sunni rule in the early Islamic period and its close surveillance and persecution of the Shi'a imams, particularly of the Twelvers, resulted in the quietist approach of the Shi'a. There were, however, periods when the Shi'as challenged Sunni powers as in the case of the Buyids in Baghdad, the Nizari Ismailis in Iran, and the Fatimids in North Africa. As we have seen above, Shi'a sympathies within the Iranian lands posed a significant challenge to the status quo at various times. The Shi'a appeal to Iranians was thus both as a religious conduit for nationalist responses to the Sunni Arab dominance as well as an authoritative form of governance with close affinity to the earlier pre-Islamic Iranian models of empire. Clearly, the significance of the Shi'a in Iran cannot be overlooked. Importantly, and as shown above, their role and influence in these lands stretches back right to the formative period of Islam, and not merely to the Safavids in the early 16th century as is conventional in most other historical accounts of Shi'ism in Iran.

The Twelver Shi'i State of Iran and the Shi'i Ulama

The Mongol dynasty of the Ilkhanids in Iran and Iraq lasted until the death of Abu Sa'id, the last Ilkhanid ruler, in 1353. From then onwards, Iran witnessed a period of political upheaval with short-lived dynasties including the Sunni Turko-Mongol Timurids who entered from Transoxania. The 14th and 15th centuries witnessed a

spread of Shi'ism and Sufism in Iran. It was during this time that the Safavi Sufi order found widespread support. The order took its name from its ancestor and founder, Sheikh Safi al-Din Ardabili (d. 1334). By 1488, the order obtained a markedly Shi'a characteristic: Shah Haydar, the Sufi leader of the time, dreamt that Imam 'Ali instructed him to wear a distinctive headgear with twelve pleats to commemorate the twelve Shi'a imams.

The consolidation of Shi'ism in Iran came about with the political rise of the Safavids, for 'by the fifteenth century, Sheikh Safi's descendants had emerged as political rulers in northwestern Iran, the border area between Iran and Azerbaijan' (Nasr, 2006: 64). In 1501 Shah Ismail I established what became the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736). However, from very early on the Safavids patronised and established numerous religious schools, or madrasas, on a grand scale. This attracted a steady stream of learned Shi'i men from other parts of the Islamic world, mainly southern Iraq and Lebanon, and very soon Iran turned into an important Shi'i centre.

On becoming Shah, Ismail Safavi declared Shi'ism to be the official religion of Iran. It was during this time that the clerics developed a hierarchical role that was to evolve to demand obedience from the believers and, ultimately, the right to rule over them. Over the centuries various events contributed to the growth of power amongst the Iranian Shi'i clergy, culminating in the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic, which brought about the rule of the clergy. The claims to power of the Iranian Shi'i clergy take a unique expression, rooted as they are in the historical and political development of the country. In this section I will briefly examine these historical developments so as to situate the

current debates amongst the intellectuals and, consequently, draw parallels with contemporary filmic discourses in the subsequent chapters.

Superiority of the clergy over laity

It was during the Safavid period that the Shi'i ulama arrogated to themselves a role elevating them over the laity. Ordinary people, they argued, 'are incapable of recognising and thus unable to choose on their own the most learned and pious from among the 'ulama' (Jahanbakhsh, 2000: 123). Thus, the Shi'i clergy not only enjoyed political support from the state, but also came to be seen as necessary in the lives of the believers. The hierarchical organisation of the Shi'i clergy is not a feature of the Sunni ulama. Indeed, it was a new development, one that did not exist in the early Shi'i doctrines or organisations either (Keddie, 1995: 24). Thus, even though there were cases where Shi'i ulama had previously held key roles within the ruling elite, such as Allam-e Hilli in the Mongol court or the Shi'i viziers of the Abbasid caliphate, these were usually as individuals who out of their personal quality or merit had succeeded in attaining high positions. It was only from the time of the Safavids that the ulama as an institution found great significance. It is in this regard, Keddie continues, that hierarchical organisation became a characteristically Iranian Shi'i development. The fact that we see similar developments amongst the Shi'a outside Iran is due to more recent Iranian influences.

Another factor that contributed to the growth of clerical power was the victory of the Usuli or Mujtahidi school of ulama over the Akhbari school by the early 19th century. The Akhbari school was established during the Safavid period by Shaykh

Muhammad Sharif Astarabadi (d. 1624), but 'its greatest influence was when the ulama were excluded from participation in the affairs of a Shi'i state, namely the interregnum between Safavid and Qajar rule (Algar, 1980: 35). It was mainly Aqa Muhammad Baqir Behbahani (1705-1803) who led the doctrinal reassertion of the Usulis:

> He established the Usuli position, which asserted the legitimacy of the functions of mujtahid, as the dominant one in Shi'i Islam, attempted to repress Sufism, taught and inspired a large number of mujtahids who attained great influence in Iran in the reign of Fath 'Ali Shah (1797-1834), and in his own person vigorously asserted the functions of mujtahids claiming 'enjoining good and prohibiting evil' to be his peculiar duty (Algar, 1980: 34).

The main difference of interpretation between these two schools lay in the understanding of the role and necessity of the clergy as intermediaries between man and God. The Akhbaris maintained that 'individual believers could understand the Quran and the Traditions (*akhbar*) of the Prophet and the Imams and did not need to follow the guidance of *mujtahid*s, who claimed the right of *ijtihad* ('effort to ascertain correct doctrine')' (Keddie, 1995: 97). The Akhbaris argued that *ijtihad* was an innovation in Shi'ism, dating from the time of Kulayni (d. 941), author of *Kitab usul min al-kafi,* a collection of traditions of the Imams, a guide to authoritative Imami doctrine in theology and *fiqh*. Indeed, they accused the Usuli *mujtahid*s of adopting Sunni positions of Hanafi rationalism. The Akhbaris gave total precedence to *naql* (transmitted doctrine) over *aql* (exertion of reason) and argued that all believers should be *muqallid*s (emulators) only of the imams and not the *mujtahid*s (Algar, 1969: 35).

The Usulis, however, who introduced the concept of *ijtihad* into Shi'ism, succeeded in asserting the necessity of the *mujtahid*s and maintained that 'every believer was required to follow the rulings of a living *mujtahid*, and whenever there was a single chief *mujtahid,* his rulings took precedence over all others' (Keddie, 1995: 97-98). These *mujtahid*s were referred to as *marja'-e taqlid* or models for emulation. The Usulis, therefore, soon established a clerical power that positioned them as intermediaries between believers and God, and this has been the dominant Shi'i theology to this date.[3] Accordingly, any Shi'a who has not attained the same level of authoritative judgement in interpreting the law from the sources 'must choose a *mujtahid* to be their own spiritual guide (*marja' al-taqlid*, 'model for/source of emulation'), whose opinions in matters of religious law are binding on those who follow him' (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 10).

By the early 19th century, in addition to establishing clerical superiority to laity, 'the Shii clergy were able to get their right to direct collection of religious taxes' (Keddie, 1995: 22). The religious dues of *khums* and *zakat* were thus paid directly to them. This economic independence further strengthened their position and consequently gave them political freedom from the ruling state.

The clergy's organised ties with the merchants or *bazaari*s was another empowering factor. As Keddie states, the ties between these two groups have been very close and very often both were from the same families through intermarriage. In fact, 'ulama'

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[3] For a detailed account of the doctrinal reassertion of the *usulis,* led mainly by Aqa Muhammad Baqir Behbahani (1705-1803), see Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1980) pp. 33-44.

was not an occupational term but rather a reference to men with certain religious learning (Keddie, 1995: 92). Thus, many of the clerics were occupied in various professions; indeed, some of them were *bazaaris*, while others were craftsmen, shopkeepers and even landlords. The ulama and *bazaaris* 'worked together in a variety of ways and influenced each other, so that any picture of merchants as a discrete group getting ulama as a divergent group to do something is belied by the interconnected history of the two' (Keddie, 1995: 93).

Even though the first records of the ulama's claims to rule go back to the late 17th century,[4] these did not materialise until the victory of the Islamic Republic in 1979 under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Soon after the 1979 Revolution, the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih,* or guardianship of the jurist, was introduced. This gave the leader the final say in the running of country. Named as 'Leader for Life' in the constitution, 'Ayatollah Khomeini now combined supreme temporal and religious authority' (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 19). This transition from charismatic leader of the Revolution to head of state seemed natural. Khomeini, however, was initially irresolute when it came to entrusting the reins of the country to the clerics. Indeed, he was concerned that the earthly desires of politics would corrupt the clergy and subsequently jeopardise their credibility with the public (Brumberg, 2001: 118).

Khomeini's rapid change of position in entrusting the running of the state to the clergy may be traced to a few key incidents soon after he came to power. The death of some 70 of his supporters in the June 1981 bombings of the headquarters of the

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[4] Keddie reports that the French Huguenot watchmaker, Chardin, 'who spent years in Iran, tells us that one group of mujtahids claimed that they were more qualified to rule than were the wine-bibbing impious shahs' (1995: 165).

Islamic Republican Party (IRP) is one such crucial factor. This was followed two months later by the death of two of his other allies, the newly-elected president, Muhammad 'Ali Raja'i, and Prime Minister Muhammad Javad Bahonar. These and other political assassinations were blamed on the Islamic-Socialist party of Mojahedin-e Khalq (MK). The final straw was when President Abulhassan Bani-Sadr, an Islamic modernist opposed to clerical rule, and the leaders of IRP were unable to resolve their differences.[5] Khomeini then had 'little choice but to exercise his "revolutionary duties" by siding with the clerics whose actions deeply worried him' (Brumberg, 2001: 118).

With all rival parties defeated and Khomeini's stamp of approval on clerical rule, the clergy stabilised their power in the ensuing years. Khomeini, for his part, attempted to articulate this new responsibility within his theological discourse. Giving it a mystical dimension, he asserted that it was not rational knowledge nor the need to determine interests that entrusted the clergy with the duty to rule. Rather, this duty 'could only ensue from a form of mystical revelation that anyone could strive for, but only a few among the clerics would attain' (Brumberg, 2001: 88). He also delegated the rulings of secondary ordinances – a narrow range of contractual issues that were not directly addressed in the Qur'an – to the clergy. As Brumberg states, these had traditionally fallen within the government's remit. Khomeini, however, declared that he could not 'imagine that God would not have looked at every aspect of any problem' and thus by 'implying that secondary rulings were also mandated by

[5] For a detailed account of the events that led to the success of the IRP over Bani-Sadr, which reflected the defeat of the moderates and the left-wing political group, see Bakhash (1985: 92-165).

God, Khomeini virtually equated the clerical power to issue such rulings with the authority of God himself!' (Brumberg, 2001: 129).

The Shi'a madrasas

Ibn Sina (Avicenna), the eminent 10th/11th-century Persian philosopher and scholar recounts his studies giving us an insight to the old methods of learning. These included 'the wandering from teacher to teacher, the informal discussion circle, the debates of learned men thrust into each other's presence by a bored and curious monarch' (Mottahedeh, 1985: 89). These encounters were the norm before the appearance of the madrasas proper. '*Madrasa*, in the modern usage, [is] the name of an institution of learning where the Islamic sciences are taught, i.e a college for higher studies, as opposed to an elementary school of traditional type (*kuttab*); in mediaeval usage, [it is] essentially a college of law in which the other Islamic sciences, including literary and philosophical ones, were ancillary subjects only' (Pedersen, et al. 2007).

The madrasas originally began as private endowments of scholars teaching their students but gradually developed into institutions that were supported by rulers and other men of power (Halm, 2004: 58-59). In fact, it was no longer solely a matter of scholarly interest and patronage that led their founders to establish these schools. Rather, the 'establishment of madrasas served the political interests of those who founded them, both individually and collectively, but the institutions themselves, and the academic activities they supported, were not subjected to systematic governmental regulation and control, and did not undergird any particular political

program' (Berkey, 2003: 45). However, many of these patrons would usually found madrasas of their own denomination and some were more closely involved with the running of the school. For instance, the endowment acts of the Nizamiyya of Baghdad, established by and named after Nizam al-Mulk, the 11th-century Persian Shafi'i vizier to the Saljuq sultans, stated that teachers had to be either Shafi'i or Ash'ari. Indeed, he himself was directly involved in the selection of the teachers (Farmanian, 2002: 453).[6]

It has been argued that the madrasa is the result of a three-stage development of the college in Islam. The first was the period during which teaching took place within the confines of the mosques, especially in their designation as non-congregational mosques. The second stage was that of the *masjid-khan* complex, where the mosque (*masjid*) was also used as a hostelry (*khan*) for out-of-town students. Finally, the madrasa proper appeared when the functions of both mosque and hostelry were combined in an institution based on a single endowment deed (Pedersen et al, 2007). Madrasas were, therefore, a development born from the spaces and activities within the mosques.

The first madrasa appeared in the 10th century in north-east Iran and was later 'spread by the Seljuqs over the whole of Iran to Iraq, Syria and Asia Minor' (Halm, 2004: 58). In Cairo, the Shi'i Fatimids founded the Azhar mosque complex in 970. Al-Azhar 'developed into a center for higher learning and was richly endowed to support students, teachers, and one of the largest libraries of the time in the Muslim

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[6] Some have argued that the Nizamiyyas were taken from the Fatimid al-Azhar model, where the Ismaili *da'is* taught the faith (Farmanian, 2002: 453).

world' (Nanji, 2006: 84). Later, in 1005, the Fatimid Imam-Caliph, al-Hakim, founded the *dar al-'ilm,* also known as the *dar al-hikma*, which was devoted to Shi'i Ismaili teachings. It is, therefore, important to note that even though madrasa became the dominant term later, in their initial stages of development there were different centres of learning in the Muslim world, referred to by different names.

In fact, it has been argued that the sudden surge of the Sunni Saljuq madrasas was a reaction to these centres as 'a counter to the propaganda efforts of militant Ismaili Shi'ism organised by the Fatimids from Al-Azhar' (Pedersen et al, 2007). This in turn had the ripple effect that other Shi'i centres surfaced around the same time as the Saljuq madrasas in many Iranian cities, including Rayy, Qom, Kashan, Varamin, Sabzevar and elsewhere. However, 'to judge by the later consonance between the Sunni and Shi'i *madrasa*s in the Iranian world, there was probably no formal distinction between them' (Pedersen et al, 2007). In any case, it was not until the end of the 11th century, but 'at least a hundred years before their Western counterparts, the European universities' (Mottahedeh, 1985: 89), that the madrasas made their definitive appearance.

As discussed above, with the coming to power of the Safavids, numerous Shi'i madrasas were built to help propagate and establish Shi'ism as the new state faith. Shi'ism was in fact an instrument to gain legitimacy for the new state based on religious authority. Traditionally, the Shi'i madrasas have been 'located mainly in religious centres which tended to be shrine cities. Najaf, Kerbala and Sammara in Iraq as well as the Iranian cities of Mashhad and Qum' (Zubaida, 2003: 183). In Iran, the significance of the madrasas grew so much that even with the advent of modern

sciences into the country and the training of lawyers and physicians, these members of the upper class elite were still likely to have undergone at least some aspects of this traditional education.

> With their huge endowments and their wide acceptance as the citadels of true knowledge and correct belief, *madresehs* usually dominated and often monopolised the world of Iranian education. In the Shiah Islamic world they had surprisingly uniform curricula and methods—something unthinkable in the time of Avicenna—and they therefore dominated the content and methods of education as well (Mottahedeh, 1985: 105).

Zubaida mentions three cycles, each lasting four years, in the Iranian Shi'i madrasa curriculum. The first cycle concentrates on the study of the Qur'an, Arabic language and grammar. Upon completion of this first level, the graduates may perform minor religious functions in mosques as well as read and recite the stories of Karbala during the mourning ceremonies of the month of Muharram. During the second cycle, students study *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and are introduced to the intricacies of Sharia through appropriate texts, commentaries and methods of deduction. This allows them to lead mosques and congregations and, in some cases, act as judges. At the final stage they are trained in *ijtihad* (arriving at independent opinion on matters of law and interpretation) by further exploring texts, traditions and commentaries. When students feel that they have arrived at that stage of independent judgement, they submit a written piece of work to their teacher. If accepted, the student is given a license to practice *ijtihad*, at which point he becomes a *mujtahid* (Zubaida, 2003: 183-184).

The traditional education system in Iran was significantly affected in its encounter with Western secular education. In 1851, the Iranian government established the

Polytechnic College, with the aim of educating Iranians in the European sciences. Thus, for the first time, an educational system modelled on a Western system was introduced in Iran. This had its own varying effects in Iranian society, including the formation of a new elite and intellectuals who wanted a change in the country's entire system of law. 'By the end of the century some of these intellectuals demanded a "fundamental law" for the state, a constitution that described the limits of the government's power' (Mottahedeh, 1985: 52). These demands voiced against the government were gradually extended beyond that of the intellectuals to include, at least initially, some of the ulama as well. However, after the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, the first constitutional revolution in the Middle East, the ulama slowly departed from the intellectuals, paving their own way to lead society.

The success of the Constitutional Revolution resulted in honour and fame for the supporters of the new educational system. However, this support did not extend nationwide or indeed seem to be evident among people from different walks of life. Some of the *bazaaris*, who, as discussed earlier, had always maintained a close relationship with the religious authorities, despised the new learning and regarded it as unreligious and hence unworthy. It is likely that they recognised the power of the new educational system, for by its very secularised nature it was largely independent from the religious authorities. This new rival power posed a threat to the religious authorities and, thereby, to the bazaaris too.

This threat became even more potent after Reza Shah (r. 1925-1941) came to power and embarked on his modernising project. Adopting a policy of secularising the educational system, he went as far as to shut down all the *maktabs* (religious schools

for the teaching of Qur'an and hadith, equivalent to elementary schools in modern times) in Iran. However, that he spared madrasas the same fate is a testament to the power of the clergy and its institutions, and suggests that he realised that it would be folly to completely eliminate them. Reza Shah's strategy to enforce modernisation was frequently twinned with violence, particularly towards the religious establishment. After he was forced to abdicate in 1941 in favour of his young son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the latter adopted a more conciliatory attitude towards the religious establishment. In fact, in 1946 Ayatollah Boroujerdi, who emerged as the 'undisputed chief *marja'* of the Shi'i world, ...worked out a *modus vivendi* with the state, based on the clergy keeping out of politics and opposition, but being assigned their niche in the religious institutions and general respect and dignity' (Zubaida, 2003: 188). In this way, the 'shrine cities in Iran and their *madrasa* and religious culture continued to provide centres of autonomy for the *ulama* and a means of perpetuating their institutions and discourses' (Zubaida, 2003: 188).

Boroujerdi remained true to his word for the rest of his life, during which the religious establishment remained largely aloof from the political upheavals of the country. Indeed, when Ayatollah Kashani and a few other clerics participated in the political turmoil of 1951, first siding with the Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq, on nationalising Iran's oil and later changing sides, they were sidelined by the religious establishment (Zubaida, 2003: 190-191). Khomeini, too, another disaffected cleric, did not openly oppose the ruling regime out of respect for his teacher, Ayatollah Boroujerdi. However, upon the latter's death, he felt himself relieved of this restriction and, building upon his earlier ideas, began a vociferous campaign against the Pahlavi regime. Thus, Qom turned into a political centre for

Khomeini's opposition. On the day of 'Ashura 1963, he gave a defiant speech directly attacking, satirising and ridiculing the Shah. 'In a charged atmosphere of mounting confrontation between security forces and the religious students in Qum and elsewhere, retribution was swift: government forces laid siege to the city and to Khomeini's residence, and in the clashes that followed there was much violence and bloodshed' (Zubaida, 2003: 193). By the time of his release within the year, all the other senior *mujtahids* had reconciled themselves with the government. Khomeini, however, once again took the opportunity to denounce the Shah's policies, this time regarding concessions of extra-territorial immunity to US and Israeli personnel. He was arrested yet again and sent into exile.

The hierarchical organisation of the clergy, the dependence of the laity on them in their relation with God, particularly after the victory of the Usulis, and their economic independence through direct collection of religious taxes, all consolidated their increasing influence. This growth culminated in the victory of the Islamic Republic and their acquisition of political power through the supreme leadership of *velayat-e faqih*. The madrasas became influential institutions not just as religious centres, but also as powerful political centres that were actively engaged with developments in state and society. Their roles in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and in the overthrow of the Pahlavi Shah in 1979 are illustrative of this point.

In the foregoing discussion I have explored the more formal and institutional facets of Shi'ism and its development in Iran. Even a brief examination of the history of clerical influence in the Iranian context reveals a very complex picture, one that makes any simple reading of the situation highly questionable. Even though as a

theocracy Iran is currently governed and led by clerics, one cannot point to a consensus amongst the clerics themselves about their social role. In fact, this has led to a diversity of views and understandings, turning current debates into one of the most dynamic and exciting situations in their history.

An exploration of only the clergy and their institutions of learning would, however, provide an incomplete picture of Shi'ism and its practices in Iran. Ridgeon argues that even though Islam is a communal religion, it is not necessarily opposed to individualism, for 'the Sufi interiorization of Islamic doctrine permitted the self to develop' (Ridgeon, 2003b: 148). This is a reminder that Islam is not a unified system of thought, doctrines and rituals but rather a diverse set of schools and thoughts that have evolved historically and responded variously within different circumstances. In the following sections, I shall outline the historical background and key concepts of some of the more personal approaches of Shi'as to religion, focusing on mysticism.

The Mystical Approach

Mysticism in Islam cannot be studied in isolation from their broader religious, social and cultural contexts. In fact Sufism, one of these mystical approaches 'has been inextricably entwined with the overall development of Islamic devotional practices, theological ideas, esthetics, and religious and social institutions' (Knysh, 2000: 326). As Knysh argues, it is therefore misleading to talk about a 'spiritual essence' of Sufism as though this were a trans-historical concept. In fact, Sufi concepts have evolved over time and been articulated variously by different Sufi masters. Moreover, even though they might not have originated within Shi'ism, they have

influenced many current Shi'i understandings and articulations in Iran. However, since this is not a study of Sufism per se, here I will only summarise some major Sufi concepts, particularly their Persian articulations, in order to discuss their application in some of the films to be discussed in the later chapters.

Sufi States and Stations

The teachings of Islam are generally associated firstly with the Qur'an and the hadith and, secondly, with their application to Muslim societies generally and the lives of believers in particular. Consequently, many discussions on Islam as a religion are restricted mainly to its theories and practice. Reducing Islam in this way, however, runs the risk of overlooking another more interiorised dimension of Islam, that of religious experience, which is equally—if not more—significant in many Islamic interpretations.

With the expansion of Islam outside its original Arabian context, Islam was faced with various intellectual and social upheavals. Makris states that Sufism was one of the responses to these challenges, one that dialogued with new ideas, practices and ways of thought. It was more concerned with

> striving for perfection through a subjective conception of a social reality animated by the spirit of God. This view sprang from the belief that spiritual maturity could be reached by following a particular training regime under the direction of a guide-cum-master with saintly qualities' (Makris, 2007: 144). It was thus that Sufism appeared relatively early in the history of Islam.

The Sufis referred to the first two codified categories of knowledge and law, the Qur'an and hadith, as the 'Way' or *tariqa,* which led to a third element. This element

'not set down so explicitly in the Koran or Hadith', is 'spiritual realisation, or the ascending stages of human perfection resulting in proximity to God' (Chittick, 1983: 10). Those who aspire to follow the mystic path strive to pass from the finite to the infinite, 'from that which seems to that which is, out of all lower forms of reality to that which is Supremely Real, and, in the end, to become Being itself' (Smith, 1995: 4).

Smith identifies four postulates on which mysticism bases its claims of the soul's ability to undertake this journey. The first is intuition or the soul's ability to see by a spiritual sense. 'Reality, in its highest form, cannot be understood by intelligence, but only by something above it' and through intuition man can 'perceive things hidden from reason'. The second is the inward light or Divine spark 'that seeks reunion with the Eternal Flame', for only if the soul is itself a partaker of the Divine can it know God. The third is going beyond the self, which is required for the purification from the self: 'The soul must be stripped of the veils of selfishness and sensuality if it is to see clearly the Divine vision'. Lastly, love is the guide and inspiration of the soul in its ascent to God (Smith, 1995: 3-6).

The predecessors of the Sufi movements 'strove to achieve a psychological and experiential proximity with God through self-imposed deprivations (especially abstinence from food and sex), self-effacing humility, supererogatory religious practices, long vigils, pious meditation on the meaning of the Qur'anic text and a single-minded concentration on the divine object' (Knysh, 2000: 8). Attaining proximity to God remained one of the constant goals throughout Sufism, even as various, and at times contradictory, approaches were identified as ways of achieving

this closeness. For example, seclusion was propagated by some as essential in attaining proximity while others encouraged an active involvement with worldly affairs.[7]

In the same vein, whilst most Sufis agreed that the goal of the mystical path was achieving the *haqiqa* or Ultimate Reality or God, the various states and stations that led to this destination were not always defined in the same way. As we shall see shortly, this meant that what was characterised as a Sufi station in one definition of a particular Sufi master or group was at times recognised as a Sufi state in another. However, stations and states were recognised by the majority as undisputable necessities in the Sufi path. These stations and states stand between the lover and the Beloved and the lover has to traverse them before reaching his Beloved.

In the earliest formal exposition of Sufism in Persian, *Kashf al-mahjub,* the 11th-century Sufi 'Ali b. Uthman al-Jullabi al-Hujwiri states:

> The term 'spiritual station' (*maqam*) denotes one's 'standing' and 'rising' in the Way of God, not the devotee's dwelling there, and his fulfilment of the obligations relevant to that station until he completely realizes it as far as is humanly possible. It is not allowable that the devotee take leave of that station until he completely meets its requirements and fulfils its obligations. In this respect, the first station is 'repentance,' then 'conversion,' then 'renunciation,' then 'trust in God,' and so on. Hence, no one may lay claim to knowing 'conversion' without first experiencing 'repentance,' nor pretend to 'trust in God' without 'renunciation.' (quoted in Lewisohn, 2001: 178).

According to al-Hujwiri, following the stations on the Way are the mystic states (*ahwal*) of ecstasy bestowed upon the seeker's soul as signs of favour and grace to

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[7] For a comparison of the various religious attitudes and devotional styles see Knysh (2000: 18-26) on Ibrahim b. Adham, Ibn al-Mubarak and Fudayl Ibn 'Iyad.

encourage him on his path. They are the gift of God alone, and in no way depend upon the mystic's own striving (Smith, 1995: 203). In short, whilst the seeker completes each station through his strict endeavours, the state is a gift that is endowed upon him through God's grace; he can have no active role in attaining it.

Jalal al-Din Rumi, the eminent 13th-century Sufi philosopher and poet, does not set out to give a systematic definition of each station and state. Like the three dimensions of Sufism, his works can be broadly divided into three categories. The first two are knowledge (*'ilm*) and action (*'amal*), or law and practice. Rumi refers to the third category not merely as a destination, but rather as a process that includes 'stations' (*maqamat*) and 'spiritual states' (*ahwal*). The believer is compared to a traveller who undergoes these inner experiences during his journey. This dimension

> concerns all the "virtues" *(akhlaq)* the Sufi must acquire in keeping with the Prophet's saying, "Assume the virtues of God!" If acquiring virtues means "attaining to God," this is because they do not belong to man. The discipline of the Way coupled with God's grace and guidance results in a process of purification whereby the veil of human nature is gradually removed from the mirror of the primordial human substance, made in the image of God, or, in the Prophet's words, "upon the Form of the All-Merciful." Any perfection achieved by man is God's perfection reflected within him (Chittick, 1983: 11-12).

Persian Poetry and Sufism

Persian Sufi literature composed over the last millennium is diverse and extensive. It ranges from Qur'anic commentaries, didactic metaphysical works, and ethical treatises to poetry composed in a wide range of classical forms. However, 'the greatest masterpieces of this literature appeared as poetry and because of their great

beauty and spiritual quality [they have] left their imprint on the whole of Persian culture' (Nasr and Matini, 1991: 332).

Historically, Persian poetry has played a significant role in the expression of Sufi concepts and ideas in Iran. The works of Sufism's greatest poets, Farid al-Din Attar (12th century), Jalal al-Din Rumi (13th century), and Nur al-Din Jami (15th century) are just the most eminent examples, which are still recited and relevant to Iranians even several centuries after their composition. It is notable that many of these great Sufi poets were negative about the art of poetry, regarding it as subordinate to religion. However, as Lewisohn argues, 'an esoteric *double entendre* is never far away in any discussion of poetry among Sufis' and in fact the 'subordination of Poetry to Prophecy, of Art to Love, is, indeed, the central fact in Sufi aesthetics' (Lewisohn, 1995: 19). But even if being a poet was to be the lowest degree of the Sufi, since his spiritual mastership was by far the higher status, and even if poetry was subordinate to religious practices and metaphysics, it nevertheless remained the most popular medium of Sufi expression.

Knysh draws interesting parallels between poetry and mysticism. He argues that there is an affinity between poetry and mysticism, as both 'convey subtle experiences that elude conceptualization in a rational discourse which by its very nature requires lucidity and a rigid, invariable relations [sic] between the signifier and the signified...Both carry emotional rather than fictional content; both depend, in great part, on a stream of subtle associations for their effect' (2000: 150). Moreover, the open-endedness of poetic language, in contrast to the argumentative language of science and logic, gives it an elasticity that allows it to refer to multiple

signifieds. This, in turn, allows readers to create meaning, even if the poem was written in distant times. The mystical experience compels the mystic to share his unique perspective with others even though it is too ineffable or subtle to be precisely conveyed to others. The characteristics of poetry make it the preferred vehicle for mystical experiences in certain religious traditions (Knysh, 2000: 150-151).

From the 10th century, cultural life within the Islamic world was gradually moving eastwards. Kynsh suggests the 'transition, in the eastern areas of Islamdom, from Arabic to Persian as the principle vehicle of ascetic and mystical ideas underline this momentous change in the cultural orientation' (2000: 139). Notably, this transition also coincides with the revival of literary Persian in Iran after almost two centuries of silence following the Arab conquest. In fact, Nasr suggests that Persia is not only one of the main arenas of Sufism with some of the greatest Sufi saints and sages hailing from there, but also that it was their poetic creations 'which transformed the religious and spiritual life of much of Asia' (Nasr, 1991: 206).

Sufi poetry deals with a variety of subjects. However, beauty, divine love and complete annihilation of man in God are recurrent themes in the works of many masters including those mentioned above. In his most famous work, *Mantiq al-tayr* (The Conference of the Birds), Attar narrates the story of a group of birds led by the hoopoe in search of the magical bird Simurgh, whose beauty surpasses any description. In this long and arduous journey, only thirty birds survive the challenges they face on their way to their destination. By the time they reach their goal, 'these thirty birds have been reduced by their adventures to practically nothing in both soul

or body' and thereby 'rediscover their true essences and see Simurgh (which in Persian means 'thirty birds') in a giant mirror. Simurgh turns out to be their own image and they achieve their goal by merging in the final act of *fana* [self-annihilation] with the divine Essence' (Knysh, 2000: 154).

Love is a central element within Sufism. Rumi's works, and particularly his collection of poems, is a combination of mystical experience with poetic inspiration. Rumi's encounter with the wandering dervish, Shams al-Din Muhammad Tabrizi, transformed him from 'a sober jurisprudent to an intoxicated celebrant of the mysteries of Divine Love' (Chittick, 1983: 3). Shams discouraged his pupil from relying on the formal education he had received and emphasised love as the surest way to God, hence the many verses that Rumi dedicates to love in his poetry. Rumi's intense love (*'ishq)* for Shams inspired him to find a paradigm of his love of God (Hodgson, 1974: 305). Rumi's view of the relationship between God and man is subtle, with 'the process of the mystical annihilation of man in the divine essence (*fana'*) ... never complete. As the flame of a candle continues to exist despite being outshined [sic] by the radiance of the sun, so does a mystical man retain his identity despite the overpowering presence of his Lord' (Knysh, 2000: 161).

The various states and stations within Sufism have been explored most extensively within Persian poetry. Sufism influenced many aspects of Iranian culture and thought, including poetry, painting, music and philosophy. Persian poetry, however, remained the most prominent medium of Sufi expression. In a comparison of Persian poetry and other Persian arts, particularly painting and architecture, Yarshater considers poetry to stand out amongst all other Persian arts. Poetry is 'not only the

fullest expression of artistic and aesthetic explorations of the people, but also the compendium of their deepest thoughts and religious sentiments. By engaging the most comprehensive artistic and intellectual interests of people, poetry constitutes the broadest stage for the manifestation of a Persian *Weltanschauung.*' (Yarshater, 1962: 70). Many of the Sufi stations and states, including divine love, self-annihilation and inner sight are explored in Persian poetry. This unrivalled art form, however, was to inform another, film, which has also concerned itself with an intellectual perception. This engagement will be discussed in later chapters. As Saeed-Vafa asserts, it appears that as a result of political censorship, cultural or personal taboos, or spiritual experience, codes and signs are inevitably employed in Iranian poetry, narrative and visual arts to convey incommunicable ideas. Thus, the 'mysteries of the system and the universe are understood and conveyed only through metaphor' (2003: 58).

The following section will explore another important influence on Iranian culture and thought, particularly on Shi'i Iranian identity.

The figure of Husayn and Iranian Shi'i identity

Husayn b. 'Ali was the grandson of the Prophet and the third Shi'i Imam. After the death of the first Shi'i Imam, 'Ali, the Shi'as followed Hasan, his eldest son as their imam. Upon his death—or murder, according to Shi'a tradition, by the order of the Umayyad caliph, Mu'awiya, in 669—'Ali's second son, Husayn was to succeed as the third Shi'a imam. The *Shi'at 'Ali* who were displeased with their Sunni Umayyad rulers persistently invited Husayn to rise against the Umayyads. In 680, Mu'awiya

passed away and was succeeded by his son, Yazid. The *Shi'at 'Ali* of Kufa, who had begun a rebellion against the new caliph, sent messages to Husayn asking him to lead them and take over the caliphate of Yazid. Husayn accepted their invitation and set out from Mecca to Kufa. He was accompanied only by members of his family and close companions. However, when Yazid sent an army of 4000 men to stop Husayn on his way, the Kufans failed to stand by their oath of allegiance and did not come to his aid.

Husayn refused to pay homage to Yazid and on the second day of Muharram was forced to camp at Karbala, a desert place without fortifications or water. Yazid's army closed off Husayn's access to water by installing 500 men on the way to the Euphrates (Vaglieri, 2009). Husayn and his companions were made to suffer from thirst for three days. On 'Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram, under the command of Shamir (referred to as as Shimr by the Shias) Yazid's army attacked Husayn's camp. By afternoon, they had slaughtered Husayn and all his men, including young children. The martyrs of Karbala numbered 72. Shimr would have also killed Husayn's sick boy, Zayn al-'Abidin, who had had to remain in his tent. However, Ibn Sa'd, Yazid's commander, restrained him and forbade anyone from entering that tent. As we shall see, the tragic death of Husayn and his companions at Karbala near Kufa in 61/680 'played an important role in the consolidation of the Shi'i ethos' (Daftary, 1998: 25-26), becoming the central historical event in the lives and consciousness of the Shi'a

Commemorating Husayn

Four years after the death of Husayn, a small group of *Shi'at 'Ali* from Kufa gathered at Karbala to lament his murder as an act of repentance for failing to come to his aid. This group called themselves *tawwabun* or 'Penitents.' This event was significant for various reasons. Firstly, even though lamentation as an act of atonement already existed in the Mediterranean religions such as Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Christianity and Judaism, this was the first time that it was practiced within an Islamic framework. 'Indeed, the collective lamentations of the Penitents at Karbala were the first documented rituals of what would eventually become a wholly new religious tradition' (Aslan, 2006: 178). More importantly, it is from this time onwards that the *Shi'at 'Ali,* who as a group had sought the political leadership of the Muslims from within the *ahl al-bayt,* or family of the Prophet, came to evolve into a distinct religious tradition called Shi'ism.

> Put simply, the memory of Karbala was slowly transforming the Shi'atu Ali from a political faction with the aim of restoring the leadership of the community to the family of the Prophet, into an utterly distinct religious sect in Islam: *Shi'ism,* a religion founded on the ideal of the righteous believer who, following in the footsteps of the martyrs at Karbala, willingly sacrifices himself in the struggle for justice against oppression (Aslan, 2006: 178).

A number of scholars have thus linked Shi'a identity with Persian ethnicity, noting that the Persian struggle against Arab domination traces its roots back to the events of Karbala: 'Husyan's refusal to admit the legitimacy of the Umayyad caliphate had been a stance that he shared with the people of Kufa, 'Ali's capital. Many Kufans were liberated slaves and Persian prisoners of war who had risen in revolt against the distinctly Arab character of Umayyad rule' (Nasr, 2007: 40). It is not only Iranians

who project this link from within, but also Arabs from outside, who even today associate it back to the Abbasid period and the Shu'ubiya movement—a literary movement that 'was formed to assert the cultural superiority of the Persians to the Arabs, and to influence the official culture of the 'Abbasid Caliphate' (Lapidus, 2002: 76). Indeed, Nasr asserts that the Arab 'treatment of Shias as outsiders – as "lesser Arabs" – has always found justification in the accusation that they are Iranian, and that their demand for rights is nothing more than a modern-day reenactment of the Iranian-led *sho'oubi* revolt against Arab rule in the early centuries of Islam' (2007: 108).

The first recorded public commemoration of Muharram has been traced to the 10th century Persian Shi'i Buyid ruler, Mu'izz al-Dawla, who enforced it in Baghdad in 963. All businesses were closed during the 10 days of Muharram and people were asked to participate in the lamentations for Husayn (Browne, 1956: 31). The practice, did not, however, survive long after the fall of the Buyid dynasty in 1055. The religious sessions known as *rowzeh-khani*, or reading religious sermons about the events of Karbala, popular among the Iranian Shi'a today, are traced back to the Safivid period. Husayn Kashefi's (d. 1504-5) composition of *Rowzat al-shuhada'* (*Paradise of Martyrs*), a literary masterpiece, became a popular text for *rowzeh khani*. 'Originally, it was customary to recite or chant a chapter from *The Garden of the Martyrs* in public each day during the first ten days of Muharram. Gradually, it was staged during the whole month of Muharram and the following month of Safar, eventually to be performed all year round' (Chelkowski, 2009). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, one of the religious functions that the madrasa graduates of the first cycle are able to perform is reading and reciting the stories of Karbala during the

mourning ceremonies of the month of Muharram. These sessions are held either at the mosques, the private quarters of individuals or *tekiyeh*s, and are a means of generating income for the clergy.

It was also during the Safavid period that significant mourning processions, along with standards (*alam*s), horses, and drums, were led on the streets during the first ten days of Muharram. These were also accompanied by some theatrical elements. The battle of Karbala also provided the 'prototype for the only indigenous dramatic form in the world of Islam' (Chelkowski, 1991: 771). This drama, in which the tragic events of Karbala are re-enacted, is referred to as *ta'ziyeh*, or passion play. The term '*ta'ziyeh*' itself 'literally means expressions of sympathy, mourning and consolation' (Chelkowski, 1979: 2).

Some scholars have traced back the roots of *ta'ziyeh* to earlier pre-Islamic Iranian rituals. The similarities between *ta'ziyeh* and particularly *siyawush-khani* has led many to believe that *ta'ziyeh* was rooted in these ancient practices (Beyzaie, 2001, Homayuni, 2001 and Malekpour, 2004). The innocent death of the Persian prince Siyawush some 3,000 years ago and the mourning rituals commemorating his death parallel Husayn's martydom and the *ta'ziyeh* performances. Even though theatrical elements were present in Safavid mourning processions, evidence of *ta'ziyeh* performance itself is not found until the Zand period (1735-1787) (Beyzaie, 2001: 117). As I will discuss further in Chapter 8, *ta'ziyeh* was condemned by both the clergy and the modernists, the former viewing it as a threat to their income and the latter as backward and old-fashioned.

Husayn: Sayyid al-Shuhada', Master of the Martyrs

David Cook outlines a number of factors that characterise the figure of the martyr. The martyr must have 'belief in one belief system and possess a willingness to defy another belief system' (Cook, 2007: 1-2). His martyrdom is more effective if this particular belief system is under attack or in a minority position, whether politically or culturally. 'By demonstrating publicly that there is something in the subordinated or persecuted belief system worth dying for, the value other believers place upon it is augmented, and that belief system is highlighted' (Cook, 2007: 2) The audience also plays an important role in the martyrdom narrative and in ensuring the success of martyrdom itself, for they are instrumental in shaping the historical memory of the martyr. This audience does not need to be physically present during the pre-martyrdom suffering or at the moment of martydom, but must have access to the information. 'Ideally for the martyrdom to succeed, there must be an absolute evil upon which the audience can focus their revulsion' (Cook, 2007: 3). This can be a ruling power or its representative that is oppressive or at least conceived to be as such within the narrative.

One can easily trace all of the above elements in the narrative of Husayn. Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, refused to give in to the Umayyad usurpers and their unjust rule. In fact, his 'martyrdom epitomized the essential illegitimacy of the Umayyad rulers, who contrasted unfavourably with his pious lifestyle' (Cook, 2007: 58). He was demonstrating a willingness to defy the Umayyad belief-system. He was in a position of minority, as leader of a political group of the *Shi'at 'Ali*, as well as in terms of the military might of his enemies who attacked him. The first audience is

Husayn's family, particularly his sister Zaynab, who is taken captive to the court of Yazid in Damascus. History has recorded the eloquent speech she delivers in Yazid's court, condemning his actions at the unjust murder of Husayn. The community itself also becomes the audience. This can be traced back to the *tawwabun* (Penitents) discussed earlier, who gathered to lament his death four years after his murder. As demonstrated, this continued over the centuries and found various forms of expression. The absolute evil, Yazid, the Umayyad ruler, and Shimr, the killer, became the subject of absolute hate and revulsion for the Shi'i mourners, epitomising all that is evil, cruel and repulsive.

The figures of Husayn and his opponents have been invoked not just in narrating the events of Karbala in the commemorative processions or in the religious ceremonies of *rowzeh khani,* but also in addressing contemporary historic moments. In fact, Khomeini's rhetoric, both during the struggles to overthrow the Shah and after the success of the Revolution, relied heavily on these religious icons. The corrupt regime of the Shah, he stated, was the present *taqut,* a Qur'anic reference to the idolatrous and tyrannical Pharaohs. Khomeini thus implied that he was the Moses of his time, who was to free the people from the enslavement of the unjust rulers. The 'unIslamic' reign of the Pahlavi Shah was to end so that the Muslim community and umma could be preserved. However, soon after the Revolution, when another Muslim country, Iraq, attacked Iran, the rhetoric changed: it was no longer that of a Muslim umma against idolaters and heretics. Rather Husayn once again became the mobilising figure in uniting Iranians to defend their country against the tyrannical Saddam and his Arab armies. Suddenly, Iranian ethnicity was once again relevant to

the Islamic Republic, which had hitherto tried to downplay it in favour of a wider Islamic identity. The historical Sunni-Shi'a differences returned to the forefront.

Husayn remains the only figure whose death has been commemorated so extensively in Iran. He plays a pivotal role in the formation of Iran's Shi'i identity. His martyrdom has turned him into one of the greatest mythical figures of Iranian narrative—a narrative that has been appropriated by various factions at different periods. Thus, Khomeini employed this narrative in his anti-Shah rebellions from 1961 onwards. He created a new image of Husayn that 'was to be not only the object of mourning and pity, but the example of courage and resistance. His image was redefined from one of passive suffering to one of protest against tyranny' (Lapidus, 2002: 483). The story of Husayn also found expressions amongst both laity and clergy, such as *pardeh khani, ta'ziyeh* and *rowzeh khani.* The former expressions allowed the laity a personal and direct engagement with religion as well as resulted in the creation of certain religious rituals which historically have not always met with the approval of the clergy. Some of the most recent developments in this regard will be discussed in Chapter 8.

Conclusions

The dominance of Sunni rule in the early Islamic period and the rulers' close surveillance and persecution of the Shi'a imams, particularly that of the Twelvers, resulted in the quietist approach of the Shi'as. There were, however, periods when the Shi'as challenged Sunni hegemony, as in the case of the Buyids in Baghdad, the Fatimids in North Africa and the Nizari Ismailis in Iran. Nevertheless, as discussed

above, Shi'a sympathies had existed within the Iranian lands and had posed a significant challenge to the status quo at various times. Shi'ism's appeal to Iranians has been read both as a religious conduit that allowed nationalist responses to Sunni Arab dominance as well as an authoritative form of leadership and governance with a close affinity to earlier pre-Islamic Iranian models of empire. Whatever the reasons, the significance of the Shi'a role in Iran cannot be overlooked and can be traced back far before the establishment of the Safavid Shi'i state in the early 16th century.

The establishment of the Safavid state in Iran marks the beginning of the consolidation of the power of the Shi'i clergy, culminating in the founding of the Islamic Republic. The formal and institutional approach to Shi'ism, however, was not always in line with the actual practices of the laity. The Sufi mystical approach was an alternative to the legalistic approach of religion and spirituality. Those whose personal approach to religion diverged from the public and communal aspects propagated by the establishment and its centres of authority were usually regarded unfavourably and subsequently marginalised. However, their rich and varied readings of ways to arrive at spiritual fulfilment has influenced many aspects of Iranian culture and thought. These variant approaches to significant religious practices, as exemplified by the different ways of commemorating the figure of Husayn, clearly demonstrate the plurality and complexity of Iranian Shi'i identity. Therefore in any study of the Shi'i expressions of religion and spirituality in Iran, it is important to pay attention to both the formalistic and the more personal approaches to religion, each of which are significant influences in the formation of these expressions.

This chapter provided a socio-historical background of Iran and the development of Shi'ism within it. The themes discussed above are examined in a whole set of films that I will return to in detail in the following chapters so as to study recent attempts at articulating and engaging with religion and spirituality in and through film in Iran. The discussion on the clergy is, therefore, then picked up in Chapter 5, where I study films whose discourses in depicting the clergy provide a space for the articulation of recent debates on their role within society. Similarly, the discussion of the mystical approach to religion in this chapter provides the background for Chapter 6, where I study films whose discourses reflect mystical teachings in Islam. In the same vein, the final discussion here of the figure of Husayn within the context of Iranian Shi'i identity informs Chapter 8, where I explore the ways in which film provides a new medium of expression for one of oldest narratives in Shi'ism.

Chapter 4: Contemporary Iranian Discourses on Religion and Cinema

Films participating in the Fajr International Film Festival are entered into numerous competing and non-competing sections such as 'International Cinema', 'Asian Cinema', 'Iranian Cinema', 'Guest Films', and cinemas of a specific region or filmmaker. The 2005 festival witnessed a new addition to its categories, namely 'Spiritual Cinema', rendered into Persian as *sinama-ye ma'nagara.* This marked the beginning of heated debates amongst journalists, film critics, authorities and lay film fans as to what constituted *sinama-ye ma'nagara.* The title *ma'nagara* became the centre of these arguments both outside and inside the festival circle, including the festival's own daily newsletter, *Jashnvareh.*

Jashnvareh is a 20-30 page newsletter published daily during the 10-day festival and includes the latest news about the festival and the participating films, directors, actors and other film-crew members. The first 2005 issue of *Jashnvareh* carried an interview with Alireza Rezadad, director of the Farabi Cinema Foundation and the Fajr Interntional Film Festival, which marked the beginning of many attempts at defining the controversial term of *ma'nagara* cinema.

> Interviewer: There is also a new and notable section, which is Spiritual Cinema. This section is very disputable from many viewpoints. How do you describe Spiritual Cinema?
>
> Rezadad: We've described it many times. Spiritual cinema is a trend, not style nor genre or kind. It's actually a tendency. This kind of cinema consists of those movies, which concern ultra-material [extra-material] phenomenon. This possibility exists in the nature of cinema and recent changes in the film industry have afforded more potential for all filmmakers. Furthermore, human being's [sic] today need for [sic]

> spirituality, religious and natural tendencies make the world pay special attention to Spiritual Cinema (*Jashnvareh*, 31 January, 2005: 24).

This was the only part of the interview to be translated and included in the short English section of the newsletter. The main discussion on Spiritual Cinema, however, continued in the long Persian report of the interview. The next question revolved around the word *'ma'nagara'* itself, which Rezadad explains by referring to the two different meanings of the root-word 'ma'na' in Persian:

> In the [Persian] dictionary of *Dehkhoda*, one of the meanings of *ma'na*, which has a philosophical aspect, is that it is the opposite of form. *Ma'na* in the cinema of *ma'nagara* does not apply [to the other meaning of *ma'na*] as meaning. Instead, it is passing from form and appearance to the other side of the material world, a path that passes through the material world (*Jashnvareh*, 31 January 2005: 9).

This was one of the earliest attempts at defining *sinama-ye ma'nagara.* On a lighter note, however, the first issue also devoted its cartoon page to the new category of Spiritual Cinema, listing six different cinematic symbols that would make a film spiritual. These included: rain, wind, a child, Afghans, an apple and finally a camera. Here is a translated version of these caricatures:

A discussion regarding the symbols of spirituality-makers!

First Symbol: Rain

Creating Instruments: ewer (*aftabeh*), hose, watering can, anything that pours water...!

Emanating Meaning: pouring love...love pouring, the rain of love, tear drops...

Second Symbol: Wind

Creating Instruments: shovel + shovel handle + heap of soil, anything that creates wind

Emanating Meaning: the wind of life, the wind will bring us, kite, you were in my wind, I've given you with the wind, fan,

Third Symbol: A Child

Creating Instruments: Bald child, snot-nosed child, bare-footed child, any other thing that brings a child to mind

Emanating Meaning: childish pity, stupid-wise children, children are always wise and adults stupid, the balder and more snot-nosed the child…the wiser!

Fourth Symbol: Afghans

Creating Instruments: one Afghan, Afghan accent, Afghan clothes, anything that looks Afghan

Emanating Meaning: misery with an accent, Afghan accent with a dressing of misery, the clothes of misery, violence against women, zombies, dirty-cleans.

Fifth Symbol: An Apple

Creating Instruments: Apple tree, an apple itself, anything red that looks like an apple

Emanating Meaning: love-y apple, round-red love, apple-y-poetry, apple-y-love, I would love to eat your apple, a poem that can be bitten into, a roundred edible apple

Finally, the Sixth Symbol: A Camera

Creating Instruments: Second-hand camcorder, a broken camcorder, anything that has the capacity to film badly, a cameraman who hiccups (the consistent shaking of the camcorder makes it more *ma'nagara*!)

Emanating Meaning: Innovation in seeing, a new insight into seeing, another way of seeing simply, a new style of creation, transformation in seeing-recording.

These humorous snippets allude to the more serious problems and difficulties of defining 'Spiritual Cinema'. Whilst the term has been around in the English language and Western studies for a while, rendering it into Persian proved more of a challenge than was perhaps anticipated. Persian language and culture, which boasts centuries of history on the 'spiritual', whether in its written texts or its religious practices, was now faced with a problem. The difficulty was not only in the choice of term but also in the definition of what exactly constituted Spiritual Cinema. One of the Persian equivalents of 'spiritual' is *rowhani,* which is also a term of respect for referring to the clergy, whilst *mullah* or *akhund* are now largely considered to be derogatory terms, particularly amongst the clergy themselves. Therefore, rendering spiritual cinema as *'Sinama-ye rowhani'* could imply 'clerical cinema'. *Ma'nagara* as a replacement for 'spiritual' was unable to address these ambiguities. Even though the term managed to deflect the attention from the clergy, its manifold implications, which we shall come to presently, ironically served to make what was being referred to, even more unclear. However, for the time being, the term appears to be here to stay. The biggest challenge, thus remains: what exactly constitutes the *ma'nagara* cinema.

In this chapter, I will first explore the various responses, particularly those of the clergy and traditionalists, to the introduction and integration of cinema in Iran. These include the harsh reactions of the clergy and their later change of heart about the medium, which allowed for a far more favourable view of it. Next, I will analyse debates on the encounter of Iranian cinema with religion and spirituality, and the question of the medium's compatibility or incongruity with religion and spirituality. In the last section, I will study the debates that followed the introduction of *ma'nagara* cinema in the 23rd FIFF in 2005. This opened up a whole new sphere for the articulation of religious discourse in the Islamic Republic. Finally, I will conclude by considering the relevance of these definitions to the study of religion and spirituality in Iranian cinema.

Cinema's Introduction into a Muslim Society

The debate over religion and film in Iran far predates the introduction of the Spiritual Cinema category in the 2005 Fajr Festival. In fact it can be traced as far back as the early days of cinema's public introduction in Iran. In a tradition where Sharia and *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence] played an important role, this new western medium provoked questions, reactions and heated debates. There were those who rejected it outright and others who argued for its merits. Cinema's position and status in Iran has thus not been stable and the Islamic reactions to it have varied. At times it was religiously decreed as forbidden (*haram*) and at other, times allowed (*halal*) (Mir-Hosseini, 2001:27). In this section I will briefly examine these responses to cinema in Iran and subsequently study how Islamic scholars in post-Revolutionary Iran have tried to articulate cinema's status within Islamic jurisprudence.

The early and later responses to cinema

The first public movie theatre opened in Cheragh-Gaz Avenue in Tehran in 1904. It was a 'long hall, its floors covered with cheap Persian rugs called *zilos,* upon which people sat as they did in the mosques or while attending rowzeh or ta`zieh' (Issari, 1989: 60). However, only a month after its opening, the cinema was forced to shut down because of 'religious opposition to cinema and political harassment of its founder' (ibid.). The clergy and traditionalists harshly opposed the introduction of this new medium. They argued that cinema was morally corrupting and against the Islamic doctrines that objected to any visual representation. On the other hand, 'Western-educated people welcomed it as a modernizing agent' (Naficy, 2002a: 256).

Cinema was there to stay, however, and it became an important medium in the negotiations of change that took place in Iran. By 1930 the number of theatres across Iran had grown to 33. Issari mentions two main events between 1930 and 1936 which led cinema to become an important source of communication (1989: 71). In 1932, as part of his modernising project, Reza Shah banned the performance of the *ta'ziyeh*, thus forcing the abandonment of major religious gatherings and instead encouraging secular activities and interests. The second event was the banning of the veil in 1936. Women had attended cinemas before but were no longer admitted if veiled. Additionally, unlike public ritual gatherings such as *ta'ziyeh* and *rowzeh*, where men and women were segregated, in cinemas they were allowed to sit next to each other. It can, therefore, be argued that cinema, was not only a new Western medium introduced into the Muslim Iranian society, but also a social instrument that

broke the old hard and fast rules. It was not merely that the content of the films and the inappropriate role-models offered through the characters posed a threat to the religious classes and their beliefs, but also that by creating a space for mixed-sex entertainment, cinema also created a dangerous new 'unIslamic' ritual.

The position on cinema, however, did not remain the same amongst the clergy or indeed even amongst the educated elites. Even though the elite and those educated in the West had first welcomed cinema, by the 1960s many Iranian intellectuals had already begun articulating their disenchantment with modernity and what it had to offer. For example, Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1962) proposed a return to the Self against what he defined as Westoxication (*gharbzadegi*, literally West-struckness). This disillusionment with the West and a need to return to roots was also reflected amongst some of the elite filmmakers. Their films departed from the mainstream, commercial *filmfarsi* genre, which comprised tough-guy movies and low-quality melodramas, and instead tried to reflect this return to the Self through nativism.[8] This trend was referred to as the New Wave Movement. Afterwards, during the anti-Shah protests of the late 70s, some Islamists who had condemned cinema as supportive of the Shah's westernisation project and United States hegemony burned or demolished 185 cinemas. Khomeini, on the other hand, who had earlier denounced cinema as a Western ideological tool detrimental to Islamic values and

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[8] In painting, Kamal-ul-Mulk (d.1940) introduced the Western realist style, which marks the beginning of modernism in Iranian painting. However, his students from the Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Tehran, brought about a new style of painting as a kind of resistance to what was considered foreign art. Zendeh Roudi, Karim Imami and Parviz Tanavoli are some of the painters who sought to establish nativism in their works. This style, later on referred to as the *saqa khaneh* style, was inspired not by high art but by local and thus religious forms. This was to create a distinguished form of Iranian painting, which bore what was assumed to be significant Iranian structures and styles. For more detail see Keshmershekan (2004).

the development of the country's youth, now changed his position. He saw it as a powerful tool that could be put to the service of the Revolution. In his famous speech at the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery in 1979 he declared:

> Cinema is a modern invention that ought to be used for the sake of educating the people, but as you know, it was used instead to corrupt our youth. It is the misuse of cinema that we are opposed to, a misuse caused by the treacherous policies of our rulers (1981: 258)

Thus, cinema got its stamp of approval within the first day of Khomeini's return to Iran after the Shah's downfall. However, it has arguably been one of the most contentious media in the Islamic Republic, strictly codified and closely monitored by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) to ensure its compliance with the Islamic Republic's aspirations. The MCIG codes, however, are not the sole factors that control which films make it to the screens. There are many cases of post-Revolutionary films that were banned after a short period of screening despite obtaining screening approval from the authorities. To give a very recent example, even though *The Lizard* (*Marmulak,* Tabrizi, 2004), which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 5, was never officially banned, the clergy's protests against this film resulted in it being removed from the cinemas only a month after its first screening.

Cinema's place within Islamic jurisprudence

Once cinema and religion were no longer opposed territories, some of the traditionalists felt the need to articulate this new relationship within an Islamic discourse. One such attempt was Ayatollah Moravveji's book, *Cinema in the Mirror*

of Fiqh [Islamic Jurisprudence] (1999).[9] The introduction to the book, by Mohammad Reza Jabbaran, a cleric based in Qom, provides an interesting overview on the necessity of discussing cinema in *fiqh*. Jabbaran states that since Islamic *fiqh*, and particularly the profound and fertile school of Shi'ism, has never been silent or indifferent towards any aspect of human life, it should, therefore, have a stance about this important phenomenon [cinema] also (Jabbaran, 1999: 13). The reason for the silence of *fiqh* towards cinema was that this industry and the art of acting throughout the world, including pre-Revolution Iran, have been contaminated by forbidden acts. Even though Moravveji does not immediately elaborate on what exactly constitutes forbidden acts, it is obvious to the Iranian reader that he is referring to the *film-farsi* genre of pre-Revolutionary films that depicted scantly dressed women with scenes of singing, dancing and sometimes erotic images. Thus, the term 'cinema' suggests vulgar acts undertaken by indecent individuals called actors (ibid.). He concludes that, at present, even if one did not believe in the necessity of cinema and actors in society, the industry has already imposed itself upon people's lives. Post-revolutionary Iran, however, has proved through the efforts of its artists and filmmakers that cinema does not require the inclusion of forbidden acts.

Cinema in the Mirror of Fiqh is divided into various topics, ranging from lying, backbiting and men and women mingling together, to acting the roles of the Prophet and the imams, and cross-dressing. Moravveji begins by stating that the book is about the position of the Muslim believers and Muslim artists regarding cinema (1999: 9). His analysis, however, does not directly deal with cinema. Instead, it examines various, and occasionally contradictory, hadiths on each of the listed

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[9] All quotations from Moravveji are my own translations from the Persian.

topics. If any of these are verified as prohibited or approved, then by extension the same applies to those topics within film and acting. Therefore, rather than being a discussion of cinema per se, the text is like any other treatise on Islamic jurisprudence.

One of the topics of Moravveji's discussion, for example, is the issue of the indirect gaze. An indirect gaze is defined as looking at a woman through her reflection in a mirror or in water, in a photographic picture or on the television screen. After examining different hadiths and viewpoints, he concludes that, like the direct gaze, the indirect gaze is forbidden, the only exceptions being photographs, television and film. Thus, if the pictures in the photographs, television or film are of unknown women, looking at any part of their body is permissible. However, like any other gaze, this is only acceptable if it is done without the intention of pleasure. Moravveji reasons that pictures of unknown women on screen or in photographs are similar to imaginary drawings of unknown women on paper, and are, therefore, permitted.

It is also important to bear in mind that whilst one Shi'i scholar might decree one way on a topic, another might be of a completely contrary view on the same issue. Thus, Moravveji's statements do not necessarily represent the unanimous opinion of all the Shi'i scholars in Iran. For example, quoting from Ayatollah Azari-Qomi, Mir-Hosseini lists 'Watching bad films, even if the actors are unknown Muslim or even non-Muslim women' as one of the sources of *fisad* or corruption (2000: 67). However, Azari-Qomi does not define what constitutes a bad film, basing his argument on the assumption that everyone knows what a bad film is. In the three kinds of 'looks' that should be avoided under any circumstances, Azari-Qomi

mentions films as the third look, which 'leads to chaos (*fetneh*), resulting in a forbidden act, even if it does not involve the intention of pleasure or evil' (quoted in Mir-Hosseini, 2000: 68). By comparing the views of these two jurisprudents on the issue of the gaze in films, already two differences of opinion are noted: the legitimacy of looking at non-Muslim women, whether known or unknown, with or without the intention of pleasure, differs according to each of these ulama. Whilst Moravveji deems that looking at images of unknown women on screen without the intention of pleasure is permitted, Azari-Qomi adjudges it as forbidden.

Interestingly, even though these discussions are rooted in *fiqh,* they are not too far removed from current Western theories, such as feminist film theory. According to psychoanalytic discourses in the study of film, one of the pleasures offered by cinema is scopophilia (pleasure in looking): 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance', this pleasure is 'split between active/male and passive/female' and the 'determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly' (Mulvey, 1999: 62). Thus, in both feminist film theory and *fiqh*, one of the main criticisms against including the female body in film is the fact that it is usually constructed to satisfy the male gaze and pleasure.

Considering that his treatise on cinema and *fiqh* was published two decades after the Revolution, it might strike us as surprising that Moravveji goes to such great lengths solely to approve an already permitted practice. Moreover, from very early on in his text, he makes it clear that he is addressing Iranian audiences. Iranians, however, already know that cinemas operate throughout the country and that filmmaking is an acceptable profession if practised within the set rules. Thus, Moravveji's conclusion

that 'Filmmaking and acting by themselves do not necessitate any forbidden act, and as long as they do not include any forbidden intentions and actions, they are unproblematic' (1999: 156) might appear only too obvious. However, his detailed examination of the Quranic verses and hadith can be read in a different light – one that sees this exercise as more than simply an attempt to decree cinema as a permitted industry.

For many decades the clergy had strongly condemned cinema and decreed it to be religiously forbidden (*haram*). Treatises such as Moravveji's provide the space to employ the same religious vocabulary to justify the acceptance of a formerly forbidden activity. Thus, contrary to the common view, *fiqh* is not always a closed corpus. Rather, it could be seen as a resource that allows for a flexible interpretation of the divine law, in order to incorporate new circumstances within the life of the believer. Mir-Hosseini explains Ayatollah Azari-Qomi's contradictory views on gender issues by his wish to 'keep the old interpretations and yet have women participate in political life' (2000: 78). Moravveji's writings can also similarly be seen as an attempt to marry the traditional theoretical positions to the laws of the state as well as to current social practices.

Cinema has been one of the most controversial media in Iran. As a western product imported into a Muslim society, it aroused many a debate regarding its place within society and a Muslim's life. The Islamic Republic's acceptance of cinema did not end these debates. However, the subject of the discussion did diverge from the initial arguments of the acceptability of the medium to focusing on the content of the films. Cinema, therefore, did manage to obtain religious approval and sanction. Provided

that it followed the rules set by the Islamic Republic's code of practice, it was an acceptable form of entertainment and or an educational tool in society. However, cinema's ability to engage seriously with religion and to join in the debates within the country on religion and spirituality remained an important arena in which scholars, intellectuals and traditionalists continue to debate.

The Paradox of Cinema as a Technological Art

Before the introduction of the Spiritual Cinema category at the FIFF, scholarship on the treatment of religion and spirituality in Iranian cinema was scarce. Indeed, it consisted primarily of discussions about the early attempts of the Islamic Revolution to create an 'Islamic Cinema' and their subsequent failure, rather than the examination of this medium in its encounter with religion and spirituality. Of the few early studies of the treatment of religion and spirituality in film there are only two serious works, written by authors with diametrically opposed perspectives. Interestingly, however, they both employed the same analytical tools in their arguments. One is Maddadpur, from the centre of Islamic Republic of Iran's Islamist ideology and the other Dabashi, from an adamant secularist stance in opposition to the Islamic Republic. Both Maddadpur (1997) and Dabashi (2002) base their arguments on Heidegger's theory of technology. Among more recent works, authors such as Mir-Ehsan (2005) also employ Heidegger's philosophy in their analysis of the treatment of religion and spirituality in film. These authors' heavy reliance on Heidegger's framework is in fact a reflection of a generation of Iranian intellectuals who were fascinated by Heidegger.

The influence of Heidegger amongst Iranian intellectuals goes back to Ahmad Fardid (1912-1994). Fardid introduced Heidegger to Iranian intellectuals throughout the 60s, 70s and even 80s. These intellectuals who comprised the country's leading philosophers, translators and social thinkers 'used to deliberate on oriental and occidental philosophical questions' (Boroujerdi, 1996: 63). It was through Heidegger that they sought to understand and provide a philosophical understanding of their disenchantment with modernity and its rapid implementation through the Pahlavi Shahs' modernising projects. Fardid, it appeared, had taken upon himself 'the task of introducing Heidegger's antimodern philosophy into the intellectual circles in Iran' (Vahdat, 2002: 114). Boroujerdi elaborates that the Iranian intellectuals' appeal to Heidegger's ideas and his like 'should not be compared as counter intuitive'. Rather, it was 'through the eyes of this latter group that the Iranian intellectuals castigate[d] the West and the age of modernity' (Boroujerdi, 1996: 176). By drawing an analogy between nativism and 'orientalism proper' Boroujerdi states:

> The fondness of many Iranian intellectuals for Heideggerian thought emanated from this yearning for wholeness. These intellectuals could easily relate to Heidegger's redolent romanticism and daring antimodernism because they themselves were affronted by and contemptuous of the modern age (1996: 179).

It is within this context that one can look at Dabashi, Maddadpur and Mir-Ehsan's fascination with Heidegger's philosophy in discussing the question of religion and spirituality in Iranian cinema.

Incongruity of technology and art

In the *Seyr va suluk-e sinamayi* (*Cinematic Spiritual Journey*, 1997), Maddadpur attempts to locate cinema's position within the discourse of religion, spirituality and technology.[10] Maddadpur (1955-2005) held a doctorate in the Philosophy of Art from University of Heidelberg and was a student in Fardid's circle. He held various academic positions in Iran, including Head of Religious Research of Islamic Arts and Culture of the Islamic Development Organisation. According to Maddadpur, cinema is an intrinsically Western art, whose origins differentiate it from all other forms of art such as painting, music, architecture or poetry. Whilst the latter originated independently from within various civilisations and cultures, cinema was essentially a Western art imported into other countries; it is, in fact, a manifestation of the 'technique system'. As a technological product, cinema is rooted in modern Western thought and philosophy, inherent in which is a reductionist view of religion. Consequently, it would be impossible for cinema to depict any religious truth (Maddadpur, 1997: 22).

Maddadpur examines the incongruities between cinema and religion from various angles. These may be summarised as follows: First, religious narrations and themes possess an otherworldly truth that is discordant with the technical and this-worldly aspect of cinema (Maddadpur, 1997: 31-32). Cinema, therefore, can only address the worldly side of human beings, which is carnal, nervous and erotic. Thus, transforming religious narratives and themes into films erodes their divine, sacred and profound characteristics, leaving them as mere entertainment. Secondly, a

[10] All quotations from Maddadpur are my own translations from the Persian.

filmmaker with an impious soul preoccupied with this-worldly life cannot transcend to other-worldly status. In fact, individuals looking for perfection do not engage in cinematic presentation and consequently become prisoners of the snare of imagination and illusion by giving to it their hearts and souls and forgetting the truth about themselves (Maddadpur, 1997: 56). Finally, it is impossible to have an Islamic Cinema, for cinema can be only as Islamic as a camera or machine can be Islamic (Maddadpur, 1997: 24).

Indeed, Maddadpur employs Heidegger's ideas on technology to refute the notion of cinema as a true art. He parallels cinematic technique with Heidegger's definition of *techne.* According to Heidegger, the word 'technology'

> stems from the Greek. *Technikon* means that which belongs to *techne.* We must observe two things with respect to the meaning of this word. One is that *techne* is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. *Techne* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiesis,* it is something poetic. The other thing that we should observe with regard to *techne* is even more important. From earliest times until Plato the word *techne* is linked with the word *episteme.* Both words are terms for knowing in the widest sense. They mean to be entirely at home in something to understand and be expert in it. Such knowing provides an opening up. As an opening up it is a revealing (Heidegger, 1993: 318-319).

According to Maddadpur, true art is a way of truth gained through the unveiling of the physical world. The 'unveiling' that Maddadpur refers to is in fact derived from Heidegger's definition of *techne.* Heidegger states that 'what is decisive in *techne* does not at all lie in making and manipulating, nor in the using of the means, but rather in the revealing, not manufacturing, that *techne* is bringing-forth' (Heidegger, 1993: 319). True art is achieved through the 'greater' or 'lesser' struggle (*jihad-e*

akbar and *jihad-e asghar*), the inner struggle and outer struggle respectively (Maddadpur, 1997: 61). In Islamic theology the *jihad-e akbar,* or 'greater' struggle, is against one's ego, and the *jihad-e asghar,* or 'lesser' struggle, is against unbelievers. Maddadpur asserts that if filmmakers try to impose themselves on the cinematic technique, this will result in chaos ruling over the film (1997: 76). Interestingly, he positions Iranian film critics and filmmakers much lower than their Western equivalents by stating that:

> The Western sciences and philosophy such as that of [Neil] Postman[11] and MacLuhan have arrived at a kind of self-awareness...However, this experience even in its lower form is rarely seen amongst our intellectuals and their cinema is also suffering from this chaos (Maddadpur, 1997: 76).

Having explored the incongruence between religion and cinema in general, Maddadpur turns to Iranian cinema in particular, which he refers to as a 'Westoxicated Eastern art' (Maddadpur, 1997: 134), and situates within the larger history of Iran. He draws parallels between Reza Shah's modernising projects and the pioneers of cinema in Iran. He asserts that the first two founders of cinema in Iran – Sepanta, a Zoroastrian, and Oganians, a Christian – were pursuing the modernising project in the same way as Reza Shah. Indeed, their eagerness to do so far exceeded that of Reza Shah, evident in the fact that they anticipated him in introducing the unveiling of women (Maddadpur, 1997: 137). This is most likely a reference to the first Iranian film *Abi and Rabi* (Oganians, 1930), which was made before Reza Shah's forced unveiling of women in 1936. Maddadpur continues that up until the mid 1940s, Iranian cinema lacked any claims to intellectualism and had

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[11] American media theorist and cultural critic.

no place in film festivals. Yet, he says, this did not stop Iranian cinema leaping out in the late 40s and 50s to test Western post-modern art.

Post-Revolution cinema does not fare any better in Maddadpur's estimation. He argues that while cinema during the Pahlavi period was based mostly on 'erotic images', after the Revolution it drew from the heritage of so-called abstract art. Although he does not give any examples to support this claim, he goes on to assert that this was only an imitation of Western artists such as Gauguin or Kandinsky. For Maddadpur, trying to force religious forms onto Western art was a fruitless effort. When faced with egoistic art, Iranian artists, who lack the real spiritual journey, feel compelled to imitate Western artists. Thus, they resort to poets such as Rumi, Hafiz, Attar, and/or the Sufi paths in order to conceal this void, in the same fashion that Gauguin resorted to Eastern and African art without having attained real imagination or presence. Maddadpur then concludes that the present avant-garde Iranian cinema, with its semi-religious mysticism and complete lack of a spiritual journey, has in fact replaced the 'roguery' (*lutigari*) and eroticism of pre-Revolutionary cinema (Maddadpur, 1997: 133).

Having refuted the notion of cinema as true art, rejected the possibility of exploring religion and spirituality in film, and briefly repudiated the works of Iranian filmmakers who attempt to do so, Maddadpur does, surprisingly, allow some hope for the future of Iranian cinema. He appears to accept one filmmaker as having attained true art: Avini, the war-documentary filmmaker who filmed the Iranian frontlines during the Iran-Iraq war. His programmes, according to Maddadpur, were

the way of the Illuminationist (*shive-ye ishraqi*),[12] and of the proximity to the holy truth, for the veil of technique and technology were torn apart and the truth disclosed (Maddadpur, 1997: 109). However, we are left to accept this view without further explanation of precisely how Avini's way was that of the Illuminationist or if, by proximity to the holy truth, he is referring to Avini's presence in the battlegrounds of the sacred war. In fact, it is clear that he is borrowing Heidegger's terms to state the disclosure of truth. Heidegger asserts that *techne* is 'a dimension of truth (*aletheia*): unconcealment, unhiddeness, disclosedness. *Techne* reveals in advance what does not yet show itself and thus does not stand forth' (Zimmerman, 1990: 232). Maddadpur ultimately concedes that, even though so far no one other than Avini has managed to achieve true art, Iranian cinema today is somehow finding a way out of its Westoxicated orbit, though it has a long way to go.

Poetry through technology

In a much shorter work, Dabashi, like Maddadpur, finds Heideggerian theories relevant to the discussion of arts and technology in Iran. Although, like Maddadpur, Dabashi is also educated in the West (he received a dual Ph.D. in Sociology of Culture and Islamic Studies from the University of Pennsylvania), he is, however, an emphatic opponent of the Islamic Republic and an anti-war activist. He has held various academic positions in the United States and authored numerous books and articles on a range of topics relating to Iran. In Dabashi's view, the state of art in Iran can be explained with a slight modification of the Eurocentric definition of the crisis of technological modernity (2002: 117). Colonialism, he states, is the essence of

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[12] This is a reference to Sohravardi's School of Illumination

technology and as Heidegger had mentioned, the confrontation with technology is only possible in the realm of art. Like all other colonised territories standing at the peripheries of technological modernity, for Iran too, technology is mysterious and doubly problematic. Not only are these territories at the mercy of the technological, but also, it is the colonisers riding these technologies (Dabashi, 2002: 118-119). However, in a colonial site[13] such as Iran, it is not the traditional that responds to technology but an ideological resistance, namely Islamism. Ironically, Islamism itself is a political and ideological resistance to colonialism and, therefore, a colonial product rooted in it (Dabashi, 2002: 122). Thus, 'Islamic art, the perturbed spirit of our moral resistance to colonial subjection, is nothing but a further Islamization of ideological resistance to colonialism as the extended arm of Technological Modernity' (Dabashi, 2002: 122).

Makhmalbaf's films become Dabashi's field for exploring both the site of ideological resistance to colonialism and the artistic endeavour to find a saving power. Dabashi draws from Makhmalbaf's interesting and varied background as a Muslim ideologue who turned into an artist, to draw parallels with Heideggerian thought and, therefore, demonstrate its relevance to Iranian cinema. In his view, Makhmalbaf's generation (Makhmalbaf was about 22 years old during the 1979 Revolution), was interested neither in the Islam conducive to Pahlavi rule, nor in the 'Orientalist production of subjectivity on behalf of colonialism' (Dabashi, 2002: 122). Instead, they resorted to Islamic art as a resistance against Capitalist Modernity. In a period lacking a theory on the nature of an Islamic art, Makhmalbaf

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[13] Dabashi is of course aware that Iran was never officially colonised. For a detailed account of how he uses the terms 'colonial' and 'post/colonial' see Dabashi, 2002: 152.

sought to create one through which he could reflect the truth and philosophy of Islam. His early cinematic career, which began soon after the Revolution, was entirely committed to the ideas of the Islamic Revolution. However, 'when a post/colonial subject, the Muslim ideologue turns into an artist, initially he cannot do anything but further cultivate the site of resistance to colonialism in what he now considers to be 'artistic' terms' (Dabashi, 2002: 123). Dabashi's arguments can be paralleled with the ideological approach discussed in Chapter 1. As mentioned there, Martin (1995) argues that the ideological approach is to understand how a specific cultural expression undermines the structure of power relations in a given society at a particular time. Similarly, Dabashi's reading of Makhmalbaf's early films as a form of resistance towards a capitalist modernity may be seen as being in line with an ideological approach.

However, Makhmalbaf's films move from a 'quintessentially colonial nature' in resistance against colonialism to that of 'systematically exorcizing his ideological demons' (2002: 133). Thus, according to Dabashi, from the films, and the danger in which Makhmalbaf and his nation were living, emerged the 'saving power' as a therapeutic antidote. Once again Dabashi employs Heidegger's view that 'The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine' (Heidegger, 1993: 341). This is a notion that Heidegger himself had taken from the poet, Freidrich Holderlin: '*But where danger is, also grows the saving power*'. Thus, according to Dabashi, the saving power in Makhmalbaf's work lies in the transformation of the site of resistance from the merely political to the poetic (2002: 135). Whilst cinematic mysticism is a universal trap into which many accomplished filmmakers such as Dariush Mehrjui or Stanley Kubrick have fallen,

Makhmalbaf's achievement was to recover from it (Dabashi, 2002: 133-135). Dabashi concludes that 'Makhmalbaf is a spectacular example of relentless honesty, with the real literally pulling the artist out of the mystifying misery of casting a metaphysical gaze on an already brutalized world' (Dabashi, 2002: 135).

Makhmalbaf's films have also generated discussions on cinema and religion among Western scholars. Considering the scarcity of Western literature on religion in Iranian cinema, it is important to mention them here, even if only briefly. Lloyd Ridgeon examines the Iranian-Islamic apocalyptic tradition and studies its representation in one of Makhmalbaf's films. Analysing *The Moment of Innocence* (*Nun va goldun*, 1995), Ridgeon asserts that it is a film in which 'Makhmalbaf's disillusionment with politics and religion is revealed most graphically' (2003: 152). The film is a re-creation of the incident in 1974 in which a 17-year-old Makhmalbaf stabbed a policeman in order to carry out his revolutionary plans. However, the actors who re-enact Makhmalbaf and the policeman respectively are unwilling to resort to violence. Instead of stabbing the policeman and shooting Makhmalbaf respectively, the 'young' Makhmalbaf offers bread and the 'young' policeman offers a flower-pot. Thus, Ridgeon states, 'the old generation is redeemed: The expectation of the Mahdi is to be undertaken in a more poetic fashion' (2003: 154). The signs, according to Ridgeon, are not explicit references to the Mahdi or to the Apocalypse, but subtle references that 'lead the viewer to the conclusion that the film indeed is a spiritual, Islamic perspective of the apocalypse' (2003: 155).

Michael Fischer, on the other hand, suggests that Makhmalbaf's *Once Upon a Time, Cinema* (1992)—a filmic genealogy of Iranian filmmaking—reflects a 'good-

humoured self-assurance that Iran will be able to incorporate new technologies without losing cultural focus' (Fischer, 2001: 480). In Fischer's view, even though Iranian cinema hires the genre formats and cinematic borrowings and conventions, its discourse is still one that constitutes an 'evolving moral discourse parallel to the older poetic, quranic, epic, literary or theatrical one' (Fischer, 2001: 460)

In fact, in sounding his views on understanding Islam through a different form such as film, Fischer states:

> Film is among the most revelatory—critiquing, contesting, negotiating the religious and ethical ideals of Islam and the Islamic revolution arguably more effectively than the philosophers or religious scholars to whom most in the West often turn for pronouncements on what Islam is or means for Muslim populations (Fischer, 2001: 485)

Fischer himself had gone to the religious scholars during his fieldwork as an anthropologist in Iran in 1975, in order to understand and study Shi'a Islam. Then, he had emphasised appreciation of the internal 'symbolic structure' as one of the key elements required in understanding a cultural form (1980: 8). Two decades later, he proposes film instead as central to understanding what Islam is or means to the Muslims, a point that is further elaborated in my study of the films in the following chapters.

Turning back to Iranian articulations, Maddadpur and Dabashi have employed the technological framework of Heidegger to discuss the treatment of religion and spirituality in cinema. Both have dismissed the efforts of most filmmakers who have attempted to deal with religion and spirituality through film, leaving little room for films that qualify as engaging with religion and spirituality. However, putting

Heideggerian thought in the service of discussions on religion and spirituality in film still continues. In the first series of Farabi's publications on Spiritual Cinema in 2005, the only Iranian work was Mir-Ehsan's *Padidar va ma'na dar sinama-ye Iran* (*Phenomenon and Meaning in Iranian Cinema*).[14] Interestingly, Mir-Ehsan also sets out to discuss film and spirituality within a Heideggerian framework of modernity and the technological imagination that dominates the modern world. An academic, literary critic and documentary filmmaker based in Iran, Mir-Ehsan is also familiar with Fardid's ideas—as evident in his writings about him—and it is, therefore, not surprising that he, too, employs Heideggerian ideas in his analysis and definition of Spiritual Cinema.

Mir-Ehsan employs Heidegger's philosophy to demonstrate the possibility of overcoming the limits of technology within cinema. He argues that cinema is the most essential mirror of modern technology and best demonstrates Heidegger's technological horizon (Mir-Ehsan, 2005: 23). Heidegger, he suggests, overcomes the separation of the physical and metaphysical worlds proposed throughout the history of Western philosophy. The idea of the disunion of these two worlds is rooted in Greek philosophy. However, when cinema as a technological art turns to a poetic understanding, it overcomes this disjunction. Thus, even though the image might appear harrowing and a serious impediment at first, in fact, it can call us from the essence. If we relinquish the Greek understanding of metaphysics, we are able to demonstrate how the essence exists within the language of image, which in turn can lead us to contemplation (Mir-Ehsan, 2005: 30-31).

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[14] All quotations from Mir-Ehsan are my own translations from the Persian.

The poetic approach is thus contrasted with the scientific approach. The scientific approach, Mir-Ehsan argues, begins with itself and ends within itself without extending beyond the senses. The Heideggerian method of the poetic approach will liberate cinema from the cul-de-sac created by the scientific approach. By employing the Heideggerian approach we can have a cinema that asks contemplative and fundamental questions about existence. Cinema as a technological art can therefore have a non-technological essence and remain faithful to the origins of the artwork (Mir-Ehsan, 2005: 31-32). Through cinema, art can overcome technology and therefore lead us on a spiritual journey (Mir-Ehsan, 2005: 32). It is not just any filmmaker, however, who attains this. Rather, it is only an artist who has experienced the Hidden with all his soul and follows the Sacred Command, who can establish the compound semiotics through the images. These images can then represent that desire of being called by the Hidden and asking questions from the Hidden (Mir-Ehsan, 2005: 33). Mir-Ehsan proceeds to clarify his position regarding cinema, modernity and spirituality in his later works, which I will discuss shortly. Here, however, it sufficed to examine only his Heideggerian approach to the question of religion and spirituality in film.

It is clear that all of the initial attempts of Iranian film critics and scholars to understand cinema as a vehicle for discussing religion and spirituality have relied heavily on Heidegger. More importantly, Heidegger's philosophy is employed in contradictory approaches, to refute (Maddadpur) as well as support (Dabashi, Mir-Ehsan) the notion that cinema is able to seriously engage with religion, spirituality, the metaphysical world or the Sacred. However, in all these cases, they unanimously employ Heidegger's theory of the '*aletheia*: unconcealment, unhiddeness,

disclosedness' to allow for the possibility of cinema's treatment of religion and spirituality. Where they remain divided is on the process by which cinema is able to achieve this '*aletheia*' and those films or filmmakers who have succeeded in achieving it through their films.

However, limiting the study of religion and spirituality in film to the Heideggerian approach can be very narrow and is insufficient. Recently, the Farabi Cinema Foundation has attempted to articulate definitions and characteristics of spiritual and religious films through other approaches, which I will discuss next.

Cinema as a Domain for Religious and Spiritual Discourse[15]

In 2005, The Farabi Foundation set up the Spiritual Cinema Centre and included 'Spiritual Cinema' as a category in the Fajr International Film Festival. This was a clear seal of approval on cinema's ability to deal with religion and spirituality. The inclusion of this new category was also followed by an wave of discussions of the subject in the press, which debated, welcomed or rejected this new approach to films. The Spiritual Cinema Centre also published and translated many books on the topic in order to clarify and justify the relevance of this newly-introduced category, and by its second year it appeared to have a clearer idea of its aims and purposes. Thus, the arguments were no longer as much about cinema's ability to engage with religion and spirituality, rather they focused on what constitutes a religious and, particularly, 'spiritual cinema'.

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[15] Unless otherwise stated, all of the sources referred to in this section are my own translations from Persian.

The official definition

Rezadad's attempts to define Spiritual Cinema in the first issue of the 2005 *Jashnvareh* daily newsletter did not end disputes among the critics. They continued to debate the appropriateness of the term *sinama-ye ma'nagara*, and pointed to its ambiguity. The publications of Farabi's Spiritual Cinema Centre were in turn an attempt to clarify the ambiguities. More importantly, these works forced Farabi to articulate, not only to the critics but also to themselves, a clearer definition of Spiritual Cinema and its characteristics. This was achieved mainly through Iranian works, some of which will be discussed below, rather than Western sources in translation. Although translated works provided an interesting introduction to the field, they focused largely on Western films, with references to Christianity and Judaism. More importantly, of course, these works did not originate in a response to the creation of a category within a national film industry. Instead, they explored the religious or spiritual in films with a broader approach. The Iranian case was different.

Before Farabi could begin to explore the religious and spiritual in films, it had to define what it meant by *sinama-ye ma'nagara*. Clearly, this task could not be achieved by relying solely on external sources. Indeed, there was an indisputable need for an Iranian articulation that drew upon the complex social, cultural and religious system of the country.

The official Farabi Cinema Foundation website defines Spiritual Cinema as one that:

> considers the current realities of mankind life in reference to its esotericism. This means that this cinema tries to find its path from 'image to meaning', 'exterior to

interior', 'substance to spirit' and 'presence to absence'. And as the meaning of existence tends to go towards completion, the Spiritual Cinema pays attention to the mysterious reality of existence through tending towards completion. Thus we can say the nature and essence of the stable values of mankind, accepted by worldwide civilizations, is the main subject of Spiritual Cinema...the satanic aspects and obstacles of human exaltation are reviewed in this cinema as well. ... Paying attention to the enigmas and mysteries of existence and mankind life in the Spiritual Cinema does not necessarily lead to solving the mysteries because the mysteries of existence cannot be solved easily and thus indicating and pointing out the current mysteries of mankind life and the daily realities of the world are actually attending to the inner and spiritual meaning of the world. (http://www.fcf.ir/english/cultural_maanagara.htm, visited 5 July 2006). □□

This short introduction, followed by a list of the aims and activities of the Spiritual Cinema Centre, is a recent addition to the Farabi Cinema Foundation's website. Farabi's publications, however, provide a more varied and detailed analysis of the topic. Numerous authors approach *ma'nagara* cinema from different angles, often offering opposing views and definitions . In this part, I will present these recent articulations of the authorities in regard to *ma'nagara* cinema and what they list as its aims and scope. These discussions include the views of Abdullah Esfandiyari, head of the Spiritual Cinema Centre at the Farabi Cinema Foundation; Hasan Bolkhari[16], cultural consultant to the minister of education who also headed the jury of the *ma'nagara* cinema entries at the 10th international short film festival; as well

[16]Bolkhari teaches philosophy of art at al-Zahra and Tabataba'i Universities in Tehran and has held various posts including cultural consultant to the Minister of Education and Council Member of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting. His analysis of the children's cartoon series 'Tom and Jerry' made news nationally and abroad. He stated that the cartoon was a project to change Europe's views of mice and subsequently of Jews from being dirty and sly to cute and clever creatures. With his craftiness and cunning abilities, Jerry the mouse causes much pain and misery for Tom. However, despite all the suffering and pain inflicted on Tom, the viewer does not hate Jerry for his acts. Instead, the film depicts Jerry as a clever and adorable character. It is in the same vein, Bolkhari asserts, that the cunning and worldly Jews are not to be hated for the havoc they play on Palestine.

as the more recent writings of the film and literary critic, Mir Ahmad Mir-Ehsan whose first work on this topic was discussed earlier.

The authorities could not but address those critics who criticised *ma'nagara* as an inappropriate term immediately after the announcement of the new category. '*Ma'na*' in Persian means 'meaning' and, therefore, the term *ma'nagara* implied that films outside this category were meaningless. Therefore, there was an immediate need to justify the choice of the term. In his attempt to do so, Bolkhari compares *ma'nagara* films and other meaningful films. He states that there are some films that have meaning but there are yet others which are seekers and therefore possessors of meaning. It is this second group of films that are *ma'nagara* (2006: 4). Esfandiyari, head of the Spiritual Cinema Centre at the Farabi Cinema Foundation, states that it was Mohammad Mehdi Heydariyan, the Deputy Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, who first suggested the notion of *ma'nagara* cinema. Esfandiyari then explains the problems of finding a suitable term for this cinema and their concern that inappropriate and limiting terms such as 'religious' (*sinama-ye dini*), 'mystical' (*sinama-ye 'irfani*), or 'intellectual' (*sinama-ye andishe*) would be (and, indeed, still are) attributed to these films (2006: 35). '*Rowhani*', another term for 'spiritual', which is also an honorific reference to the clergy, was another alternative. Esfandiyari admits that this was the closest term to the notion they had in mind, since it encompassed films that were about both this world and the other, body and soul, form and meaning as well as transcendence and harmony with religion and religious aims. However, it was not felt to be comprehensive enough and might have excluded parts of transcendental or intellectual cinema (Esfandiyari, 2006: 37).

Even though all of Farabi's English literature referred to 'Spiritual Cinema' as the equivalent for *ma'nagara* cinema, it was not regarded as the best rendition. According to Esfandiyari although 'spiritual' is the closest translation of *ma'nagara*, *ma'nagara* is more than just spiritual (Esfandiyari, 2006: 51). However, as evident from the discussions below, this objection is based on a very narrow definition of the English word 'spiritual'. Bolkhari (2006: 1) states that 'spiritual' refers only to 'ghosts' and 'the afterworld', and is only used when the human soul leaves the body. It is, therefore, a term that refers to the time of death. However, in 'Iranian-Islamic thought', the term '*ma'na*' has a far deeper and wider meaning than soul, ghost or death. In this worldview, '*ma'na*' is not the equivalent of death, but rather its opposite – for '*ma'na*' is life itself, and the truth that human beings seek in their struggle for perfection during their lifetime. In this sense, the English translation 'Spiritual Cinema' reduces *ma'na* to death and is, therefore, inappropriate. *Ma'na,* however, Bolkhari continues, is one of the key concepts of our Islamic, Eastern and humanistic wisdom. Bolkhari then locates the term within the thought of Iranian philosophers. In the philosophy of the 12th-century Sohravardi, founder of the School of Illumination—one of the most important schools in Islamic philosophy—*ma'na* is a degree of light. According to Mulla Sadra, the 17th century philosopher, *ma'na* is one of the degrees of existence. In the works of the 13th century philosopher and poet, Rumi, *ma'na* is the opposite of form and image. Bolkhari then concludes that *ma'na* is a profound term and *ma'nagara* cinema is one that invites its viewer to think (Bolkhari, 2006: 1-3). In fact, in his narrow approach to the term 'spiritual', Bolkhari's translation of the term ma'na in all its senses is highly appropriate; nonetheless he appears to confuse it with the very specific popular concept of 'spiritualism'.

Bolkhari also argues that *ma'nagara* cinema is a production not solely of the filmmaker but also of the audience. He states that it is the auteur filmmakers and the *ma'na*–seeking audiences who make *ma'nagara* cinema. *Ma'nagara* cinema is, therefore, not a movement that can be produced or given a specific direction; rather, it is a cinema that only cinema itself creates, not the people in the industry nor the authorities of a state (Bolkhari, 2006: 6-7). According to Esfandiyari, *ma'nagara* cinema deals with the reality of the world and man, whilst referring to their esoteric aspects. *Ma'nagara* cinema seeks the secrets that exist behind these realities. It deals with the mysteries of the world without necessarily trying to resolve them, instead referring to these enigmas and the signs surrounding them. It, therefore, strives to advance from the attributes of a phenomenon to its essence, from form to meaning, from exoteric to esoteric, from outer to inner, from material to essence, from body to soul and from obvious to hidden. Consequently, *ma'nagara* cinema does not dissociate any of these binary sides of the real world from each other (Esfandiyari, 2006: 37-38).

The official definition broadens the domain of *ma'nagara* cinema to include popular films. Bolkhari refers to *Pinocchio* (Roberto Benigni, 2002) as an example of a *ma'nagara* film that demonstrates how seeking a life of pure pleasure leads to the life of an absolute ignoramus or donkey. The film, in fact, invites us to reflect upon the real meaning of life (Bolkhari, 2006: 4-5). Esfandiyari states that *ma'nagara* cinema is not a 'genre' or 'type' of cinema, but a contextual phenomenon that can occur in any kind of cinema (Esfandiyari, 2006: 40). He lists 12 topics that provide the context for *ma'nagara* cinema, without entering into an analysis of how they

constitute *ma'nagara* cinema. It remains unclear, therefore, whether the inclusion of any one of these topics would be necessary and sufficient to interpret a film as *ma'nagara*. In some instances he briefly compares the filmic references to Qur'anic verses and hadith. These parallels may be compared to the theological approach discussed in Chapter 1. Here are the topics he lists, with examples:

1) Soul, such as *Ghost* (Zucker, 1990), *Flatliners* (Schumacher 1990)
2) Hereafter, such as *What Dreams May Come* (Ward, 1998)
3) Mind and Eyes, such as *The Sixth Sense* (Shyamalan, 1999), *A Beautiful Mind* (Howard, 2001)
4) Unusual human power, such as *Carrie* (Carson, 2002)
5) Healing powers, such as *Indigo* (Simon, 2003)
6) Discovery and grace (those with the powers of knowing and seeing), such as *Final Destination* (Wong, 2000)
7) Dreams and Nightmares, such as *Leily is with Me* (Tabrizi, 1996).
8) Miracles and Divine grace, such as *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Coen, 2000), *The Ten Commandments* (DeMille, 1956), *Ben-Hur* (Wyler, 1959) and *The Passion of the Christ* (Gibson, 2004).
9) Satan and Angels, such as *Der Himmel uber Berlin,* or *Wings of Desire* (Wenders, 1987)
10) *Jin* (Devil), such as *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973).
11) Lyrical and Intuition, such as films by Tarkovsky and Kiarostami.
12) Relationship with the dead, such as *Dragonfly* (Shadyac, 2002) and *White Noise* (Sax, 2006).

Similarly, Mir-Ehsan asserts that *ma'nagara* cinema can be found in both intellectual art films and popular films. More interestingly, he explores spirituality in the often-condemned *filmfarsi* genre of pre-Revolutionary Iranian cinema. The populist *filmfarsi,* despite erotic scenes and song and dance sequences, *did* support the traditional and ethical values of faithfulness, integrity and belief in *halal* and *haram* (the permissible and forbidden), all of which are rooted in religion (Mir-Ehsan, 2006: 11). As discussed earlier, Maddadpur condemned early Iranian filmmakers, including Oganians, as pioneers of the Westernisation and modernisation project in Iran. Mir-Ehsan, however, hails Oganians' *Haji Aqa, the Cinema Actor* (*Haji Aqa, actor-e sinama*, 1932) as the best and most intelligent film on the opposition of tradition and modernity. He reads the film within the framework of the Heideggerian approach to modernity and spirituality, arguing that it demonstrates the coexistence of the two. Modernity has continuously defended its spiritual values and meanings, even as they differ from the traditional world. *Haji Aqa*, he argues, displays the new spirituality in modernity and shows that not everything which is new is unethical (Mir-Ehsan, 2006: 10-12). Mir-Ehsan's approach and his inclusion of the ethical and traditional values in reading religion and spirituality in films may also be compared to the theological approach discussed in Chapter 1.

The film critic's approach

There were various responses to the *ma'nagara* category amongst film critics. Some endorsed the Farabi approach, others were not so convinced. I will first outline the discussions of those who looked upon the *ma'nagara* category favourably before

examining the views of those who are still sceptical. Like Bolkhari, mentioned above, Abulfazl Horri and Chista Yathribi both emphasise the role of the audience in *ma'nagara* films. This may be compared to Lyden's approach of 'film as religion'. As discussed in Chapter 1, Lyden, too, emphasises the role of the form and its reception rather than the content of the film as an important factor in the religious function of film. Horri, a Quranic researcher and film critic, states that it is the audience who read a film as spiritual or religious (2006: 57). The viewer's engagement with *ma'nagara* film can become a religious experience. Indeed, the film can act as a medium between the audience and the sacred. If this is achieved, it is as though the viewer has participated in a religious ritual (Horri, 2006: 58). Similarly, Yathribi, a film critic, editor and university lecturer, argues that *ma'nagara* films are dependent on the viewers; how they read a *ma'nagara* film depends on how their consciousness encounters it (Yathribi, 2006: 79). She also asserts that, like worship, the experience of watching a *ma'nagara* film should recreate the experience of inner wisdom and faith. Muslims believe that it is important to picture the infinite and immortal essence of God in a mortal framework. Thus, the outward form of the sacred is represented in ritual ceremonies, images and buildings. The inner form, however, is esoteric, and lives in every creature and should never be illustrated. Eastern religious cinema does not illustrate the essence of the Sacred, the prophets or the imams. Instead, it provides us with an illustration to imagine their glory in different affairs (Yathribi, 2006: 71). However, Yathribi fails to elaborate what exactly constitutes 'the outer form', 'the inner form', 'the essence of the Sacred' and 'imagining the glory' in cinema.

The distinction between the spiritual (*ma'nagara*) and religious films remains uncertain. Whilst the authorities were adamant that *ma'nagara* films were not religious films,[17] some critics seem to have conflated the two into one category. Yathribi begins her discussion by using the terms *ma'nagara* and *dini* (religious) interchangeably, but finally settles on *dini*. She contrasts what she calls Eastern and Western religious films, and lists a series of differences between them. Western religious cinema, such as the works of Ingmar Bergman, attempt to find answers to man's despair and search for meaning. Eastern religious cinema, on the other hand, is not about man's quest for hope or faith, because he already possesses it. Rather, this cinema expresses his understanding of the world and his worshipful attitude. Western religious cinema, like the Existentialist philosophers, states Yathribi, expresses fear and anxiety. It approaches contemporary human circumstances with an apocalyptic gaze. The films are, therefore, a search for a glimmer of love, faith and the salvation of the soul. Eastern religious films, however, look at the world with love and without any Existentialist anxiety. Western religious films have a specific time and space whereas their Eastern counterparts do not belong to any real time or space and are, in fact, beyond both. Western filmmakers, Yathribi continues, use everything in their films for practical reasons alone and not for aesthetics. Eastern filmmakers, such as Iranian filmmakers, Kobayashi (Japan), Satyajit Ray, Vijaya Mehta, Shaji N. Karun (India), Parajanov and Tarkovsky (Russia) turn every ordinary and living thing into religious signs and creations. In addition, Yathribi states, Western religious cinema separates art from life, thus the films have a direct missionary approach and are propagandist, such as *The Ten Commandments*

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[17] See Esfandiyari's concern that *ma'nagara* films would be referred to as 'religious' films (2006: 35) discussed above.

(DeMille, 1956) and *Moses the Lawgiver* (de Bosio, 1974). Eastern religious cinema, by contrast, depicts the life and customs of ordinary people and their rituals. Yathribi states that this cinema does not necessarily have apparent religious symbols, figures or epics, but nonetheless, without referring to religious issues, reflects the primacy of the spiritual world over the material world. Thus, in the works of Tarkovsky and Bergman, there is a fresh approach to the depiction of faith, salvation and forgiveness. The subject of Western religious cinema, she continues, is man's relationship with God and his creation from beginning to eternity. The subject of Eastern religious cinema, on the other hand, is people's relationships with each other in a world that is constantly observed by God (Yathribi, 2006: 67-71).

Yathribi's list of comparisons, however, does not provide a better understanding of *ma'nagara* cinema or, in fact, the differences between Eastern and Western religious films. Her arguments are instead sweeping generalisations about each of these categories, and her selection of examples of films or filmmakers is often inconsistent. Ingmar Bergman, for instance, is initially categorised as a Western filmmaker, only to move into the Eastern category a little later, where he fits better within the framework of that particular discussion. Moreover, she draws a narrow boundary around Western religious films, confining them to the depiction of explicitly religious themes, such as religious figures or events (Yathribi, 2006: 69). The boundaries for the Eastern category, however, are wider and more fluid and include all films that 'reflect the primacy of the spiritual world over the material world'. Moreover, drawing a crude distinction between 'Western' and 'Eastern' religious films does not achieve the complex task of deciding whether a cinema is 'religious' or 'spiritual'. Rather, the determining factors of 'Western' and 'Eastern'

cinema remain unclear in Yathribi's arguments. Is it the nationality of the filmmaker, the setting of the film, or the philosophy and worldview that the film endorses, which classify a film as 'Eastern' or 'Western'? For instance, Tarkovsky's films are consistently used as examples of 'Eastern' religious films. However, most of his notable works not only were made and set in Europe and in European languages, but also bore significant Christian themes and metaphors. Therefore, one can argue that there are far more 'Western' elements than 'Eastern' in his films.

Defining a certain category of films by dividing world cinema into two loose geographical zones is clearly of no avail. Putting films from India, Japan, Russia and Iran into one homogeneous group, and films from the 'West' into an opposite group, does little to tell us about their different approaches to the treatment of religion. Yet another problem with Yathribi's groupings is that her examples of Western religious cinema are confined to Hollywood films, overlooking cinema in Europe and America (e.g. the works of Lars von Trier and Robert Bresson). Moreover, even though she refers to Hollywood religious films as propagandist, she fails to acknowledge the many 'Eastern' films that follow the same Hollywood conventions, and are by the same token then also 'propagandist'.

Another approach in analysing films as *ma'nagara* is to contextualise them within the sacred texts of the Qur'an and hadith. The film director, scriptwriter and critic, Farokh Ansari-Basir, for example, states that *ma'nagara'i* (*ma'nagara*-ism) is recognising the symbols of the hidden world's effect on the material world (2006: 86). He argues that the following Quranic verse will help us understand the roots of this kind of understanding:

> Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and the day; in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which Allah sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds which they trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth—(Here) indeed are Signs for a people that are wise □(2: 164).

Thus, according to Ansari-Basir, filmmakers who know their Qur'an attempt to base the semiotics of their films on the Qur'anic interpretation of the world, for example Tabrizi's *One Piece of Bread* (*Yek tekkeh nan,* 2005). The world of this film is a world with God's direct involvement. Ansari-Basir says that even though there are weaknesses in the selection of some of the symbols in *One Piece of Bread,* the overall result is impressive, for the film succeeds in depicting God's constant presence in the world and His miracles (2006: 87-88). However, he does not limit the Qur'anic context to Iranian films. In his analysis of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and Alejandro Amenábar's *Others* (2001), he locates these Western films within the framework of the Qur'anic worldview. The life cycle of the astronaut in *2001: A Space Odyssey* does not end with old age and death. Rather, it continues after death into a foetus-like being. He then compares this continuation of life, albeit this time from a far more advanced terminus a quo, to Qur'an 84: 19, which states: 'Ye shall surely travel from stage to stage' (Ansari-Basir, 2006: 93-98).

Unlike Yathribi, Ansari-Basir does not divide the films into Western or Eastern. Rather, he looks at themes in film that can be paralleled with the sacred Islamic texts, and thereby enables the categorisation of these films as *ma'nagara.* This is similar to the theological approach discussed earlier in the Western discourses to religion and spiritiuality in film. The problem with this approach, however, is that it

is almost impossible not to force a certain interpretation onto films that are highly unlikely to have been inspired by the Islamic texts. Ansari-Basir is aware of this and tries to justify his approach: 'I am not saying that these films are indebted to the Holy Books such as the Qur'an. Instead, I want to emphasise that if a film is truly *ma'nagara*, it can be compared to the teachings of the Sacred Books. These Sacred sources should be the yardstick to distinguish between real *ma'nagara* metaphors and those that feign spiritual meanings in the film' (Ansari-Basir, 2006: 99).

Opponents of 'ma'nagara'

Not all critics, however, endorsed the Farabi definitions of *ma'nagara* cinema and many remained unconvinced by Farabi's reasoning. In an interview with *Mehr News* (18 February 2006), Javad Shamghadri, art advisor to the President, stated that 80 percent of all the Iranians films that participated in the 24th FIFF did not conform to the political ideas of President Ahmadi-Nejad's government. The fact that a significant number of them depicted the breakdown of family life and ethical values was, in his view, a conspiracy by outside (i.e. Western) forces, to destroy the local culture from within. Shamghadri refers to some participating Iranian films as vulgar depictions, without specifying exactly what he means by this. In the same interview, he objects to *ma'nagara* cinema, stating:

> I am opposed to the title of *ma'nagara* proposed by the Farabi Cinema Foundation. Had Iranian cinema ever worked outside the realm of meaning that it intends to do so now? Had [post-Revolution] Iranian cinema ever gone towards vulgarity? Have we ever produced films that had anything but spiritual outlook and values? Overall, I feel that this grouping is not appropriate. Our Revolution was *ma'nagara* and our art and cultural products have also been in line with these values (Shamghadri, 2006)

He then goes on to argue that since Iran already had religious cinema, there was no need to replace it with *ma'nagara* cinema. When one hears the word 'religious cinema', he says, the audience undoubtedly expects films with divine and spiritual concepts. However, the introduction of the new category of *ma'nagara* has paved the way for various philosophies, ideas and even inappropriate concepts to easily be imported in the name of cinema. This is, in fact, extremely dangerous (Shamghadri, 2006).

Nasir Bakideh, the director of the Iranian Young Cinema Society, is another critic of the category of *ma'nagara* Cinema. Like most others, he begins by criticising the term '*ma'nagara*' itself. He states that every cinematic work has a specific meaning and value and that these are indivisible. It is wrong to assume that *ma'nagara* films are religious films. For Bakideh, all Iranian films have a particular approach to the rich Iranian and Islamic culture and with this approach it is possible to create meaningful works. Thus, *ma'nagara* cinema as a separate entity does not really exist (Bakideh, 2006).

The creation and general acceptance of the new category proved far more complicated than the Farabi Foundation had initially anticipated. The need to articulate a definition of *ma'nagara* cinema opened up interesting debates and resulted in a gamut of theories that included vague classifications, contradictory views and debatable comparisons. Some laid emphasis on the filmmaker, others on the audience and yet others on the medium of film itself. The opponents of the *ma'nagara* category do not fare any better in their argumentations. Their

articulations, too, are weak and at times contradictory. Nevertheless, there was a consensus, among opponents as well as proponents of the *ma'nagara* category, that cinema was a proper domain for religious and spiritual discourse.

Conclusions

Cinema's eventful history in Iran provides a colourful picture. It has always remained entwined with both the religious authorities and the state (whether in its secular or its religious manifestation). Reza Shah used it as a tool in his modernising project. The clergy and traditionalists, on the other hand, strongly opposed it in the beginning, but ultimately, with Khomeini's blessing, it became regarded as an ideal educational tool for society. The Islamic Republic, which merged religious and political powers, was no longer concerned whether cinema was acceptable or relevant to Muslim Iranian society. Indeed, Moravveji's treatise on Islamic jurisprudence and cinema was no more than an exercise in aligning the traditional theoretical positions with state laws and contemporary social practices. The question instead was cinema's ability to seriously engage with religion and spirituality. A few such as Maddadpur still lingered on what they saw as a contradiction between a Western medium and Islamic religious values. The compatibility of these two, however, was no longer an issue for most. Iranians had embraced the modern Western medium and succeeded in making it their own.

The launch of the *ma'nagara* category in the 2005 Fajr International Film Festival and the formal endorsement of 'spiritual' films resulted in heated debates. The various attempts at defining *ma'nagara* cinema by the Farabi Foundation,

academics, journalists, filmmakers and others have widened its scope of interpretation. However, from reviewing these views, it also becomes clear that there is no one comprehensive definition. As in the Western exploration of religion in cinema discussed in Chapter 1, no one approach can do justice to the numerous possibilities for studying religion or spirituality in film. What is significant is the recognition of cinema's legitimate participation in discourses on religion and spirituality, and more importantly its ability to articulate its own religious or spiritual discourse. This has opened up a new avenue that employs a completely modern medium to express religious and spiritual ideas, to retell in a new dimension the truths of the fifteen-centuries-old religion and the numerous facets of its expressions and experiences.

Prescriptive approaches and checklists of items that would constitute religious or spiritual films are far more limiting than illuminating. Thus, having pointed to the dilemmas facing those who have tried to articulate 'religious' and/or 'spiritual' films, I do not attempt to resolve them. Instead, in the following chapters I intend to explore the various ways in which the Iranian Shi'i discourse – in its various mystical, theological and ritual forms – emerges on the silver screen. These filmic discourses are, therefore, a new entry to the rich corpus of Shi'i expressions such as literature, poetry, art and architecture.

Chapter 5: Filmic Discourses on the Role of the Clergy in Iran

In some Muslim traditions, a man who has divorced his wife three times can only remarry her after she has married and divorced another man. And only after this second marriage is consummated can the second husband divorce her so that it is permissible for her to remarry her original husband. This second husband is referred to as *muhallil*, literally meaning '"someone who makes a thing legal, legaliser, legitimator", the figure who, in classical Islamic law acts as something like a dummy or a "man of straw", in order to authenticate or make permissible some legal process otherwise of doubtful legality or in fact prohibited' (Bosworth, 2008). The title of the *fimfarsi* comedy, *Muhallil* (Nosratollah Karimi, 1971), is a telling reference to the story of the film, which surrounds the 'triple divorce' of a wife whose husband, Haj Agha, wants to remarry her.

Haj Agha is a jealous husband who holds very strict views on women's modesty and chastity. When he mistakenly assumes that his wife is having an affair, in his rage he consents to the mullah's suggestion of a triple divorce. However, after all is revealed he regrets his hurried decision and becomes desperate to remarry his now ex-wife. To his utter dismay he finds out the full consequences of a triple divorce and the attendant need of a *muhallil* if he wants his wife back. The husband's efforts at finding a *muhallil* whom he can trust, and his obsession with watching over his wife when she is finally married to this *muhallil,* make for some comical scenes in the film.

The film contrasts the Shah's modernised legal system with the traditional one. In the former, the husband is not legally allowed to divorce his wife without first referring to the secular courts, and triple divorce is in any case forbidden by the law. Nonetheless the cleric, representing the Sharia law, pronounces the divorce decree. Consequently, even though the divorce has not been formally registered and Haj Agha is still legally married to his wife, the obligations of Sharia do not allow him to continue their marital relationship, and husband and wife become forbidden to each other. The film depicts the cleric, with his comic appearance and accent, as shortsighted and stubborn. He stresses that the 'the law of God is justice itself'. However, he is at the core of the problems that arise in the film, as he insists on a blind following of what he refers to as the Prophet's tradition, even as it ruins the lives of a happy family. As well as criticising some traditional attitudes such as patriarchy and the ideals of masculinity, the film is a satire on the clergy.

In fact, there have been very few satires on the clergy in the history of Iranian cinema. In post-Revolutionary Iran, until recently there were only deferential references to the clergy in cinema. Other than leading ritual acts such as prayers, marriages, deaths and sermons, these men of God were removed from the quotidian concerns of ordinary people, and remained largely peripheral to the main characters of the films. This is unsurprising, considering the sensitivity of the topic and the strict codes set down by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which bans all films and videos that 'blaspheme against the values and personalities held sacred by Islam and other religions mentioned in the Constitution' (Naficy, 2002b: 36).

However, the new millennium saw a resurgence of films with clergy as their protagonists. These included Mirkarimi's *Under the Moonlight (Zir-e nur-e mah,* 2001*)* and Tabrizi's *The Lizard* (2004), both of which opened to general release in Iran. Reza Mirkarimi, a graduate of graphics from Tehran University, was born in 1966. His initial experiences of filmmaking were in short films and television series. *Under the Moonlight* was his second feature film, after his debut *The Boy and the Soldier (*2000). Most of his films carry a religious theme; his latest work, *So Close, So Far* (2005), an entry in the 'Spiritual Cinema' category of the 23rd Fajr International Film Festival, won the Best Film award of the festival.

Kamal Tabrizi was born in 1959 and graduated from the Art University in Tehran. After a series of short films and working with the cultural sections of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcast Television, he made his first feature film, *The Passage* (*'Obur*), in 1989. Amongst his other works, before the making of *The Lizard,* the comedy *Leyli is with Me* (*Leyli ba man ast,* 1995) was a notable success. A satire on the Iran-Iraq war, *Leyli is with Me* employs the same lead actor as *The Lizard,* Parviz Parastooyi; he plays a television cameraman who, despite desperate efforts to stay well away from the war zone, finds himself in the frontline and then is inadvertently taken for a hero. Many of Tabrizi's films deal with religious themes, a reflection of his own religious background. His latest film, *One Piece of Bread* (*Yek tekkeh nan,* 2005), is a distinct departure from *The Lizard,* with references to the metaphysical world. The screenwriter of this film, Mohammad-Reza Gohari, is the co-screenwriter of Mirkarimi's *So Close, So far. One Piece of Bread* was also entered into the 'Spiritual Cinema' category of the 23rd FIFF, but it was not received well. Some reviewers criticised it as a 'letter of repentance', a film made to appease those he had

upset with his earlier film *The Lizard* (Talebi-Nejad, 2006). During the 2005 presidential elections, Hashemi Rafsanjani, who ultimately lost to Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad, employed Tabrizi as his campaign manager. Some Iranians, therefore, sarcastically referred to the campaign film he made for Rafsanjani as *Marmulak II* [*The Lizard II*].

Each of these films, *Under the Moonlight* and *The Lizard,* articulates a discourse that differs from previous representations of the clergy. They not only propose a different engagement of the clergy with the public, but also critically examine the lofty positions they enjoy in society, which in turn serves only to further emphasise their hierarchical relationship with the laity.

This chapter examines *Under the Moonlight* and *The Lizard,* and draws parallels with recent discourses on the Iranian clergy. I argue that these filmic narratives provide a space for the articulation of debates on the role of the clergy within society, including some of the more contentious issues that have otherwise been difficult to discuss publicly inside Iran. I demonstrate how these filmmakers have creatively employed the medium of film to actively engage in some of these debates. This chapter, therefore, argues that the films do not merely reflect these debates, but are themselves part of them and of a larger discourse within Iranian society. Whilst the published discourses of intellectuals such as Soroush are accredited texts that are recognised both within and outside of Iran, these parallel filmic discourses have not yet received such recognition.

This oversight does injustice to the potential of a medium that can be more effective than its written or oral equivalents, particularly in the context of Iran. First, the metaphorical language of film provides a space for discourses that might otherwise face harsh censorship. Even when films are banned, the filmmakers are not punished with the severity reserved for authors or lecturers propagating similar ideas through their own media. Moreover, a ban on an Iranian film usually turns it into a highly popular commodity, with considerable demand for pirated copies. Indeed, filmmakers are sometimes accused of deliberately stirring up contentious debates around their films in order to ensure high sales upon final release. Secondly, the accessibility of the medium has enabled these films to engage very effectively with a wider audience, even if the level of engagement varies according to the background of each individual.

I begin with a brief review of debates that have questioned the legitimacy of the clergy's power over the laity. I will then critically examine the current role of the clergy through *Under the Moonlight* and *The Lizard* and locate these filmic discourses within the wider discussions propounded by Iranian intellectuals. Finally, I will demonstrate how these films subtly compare not only the institutionalised morals and ideals of society with the ethical values of individuals, but also the relevance of religious injunctions to their everyday modern life.

Resistance to monopolising Islam

The clergy's rise to power began with the establishment of the Shi'i Safavid State discussed in Chapter 2. The subsequent history of Shi'i Iran witnessed many events

that contributed to this power, reaching a pinnacle during the Islamic Revolution in 1979. By the 17th century, the right to the direct collection of religious taxes gave the clergy economic independence. The 19th century victory of the Usulis over the Akhbaris endowed the clergy with the power to act as intermediaries between man and God. The clergy therefore became a necessity in the lives of the believers, for, in the absence of the hidden Imam, it was only from amongst the ulama that a source of emulation (*marja'-e taqlid*) could be sought. The believers had to follow the religious opinions of their source of emulation; and the clergy were placed in a hierarchical position above the laity. Ayatollah Khomeini introduced the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, or guardianship of the jurist, and the 1979 Constitution of the Islamic Republic named him as the Supreme Leader for Life and entrusted him with the duty to rule.

Another aspect of formal Shi'i expression is the madrasa. These started off as private institutions in early Islamic history, but gradually developed into institutions of learning supported by rulers and other men of power, gaining a political shade. In fact, as discussed in Chapter Two, they evolved to become not only religious, but also powerful political centres that actively engaged with developments of state and society. Indeed, the Safavids built the Shi'i *madrasa*s to help propagate the new faith. In the 20th century they played a crucial role in the 1905 Constitutional Revolution and in the overthrow of the Pahlavi Shah in 1979. The *ijtihad* (effort to ascertain correct doctrine) practised by Shi'i ulama gives them more flexibility in dealing with contemporary issues. As Zubaida states:

> The craft of the law remains central to religious learning and practice for the Shi'a as much as for the Sunni world. Yet, Shi'i learning seems to have retained more of the philosophical, reflective and even mystical elements of medieval Islam that its Sunni

counterpart, which has been more inclined to legalistic and textual limitations on reflection (Zubaida, 2003: 184).

It is this very 'philosophical and reflective' element within Shi'ism that allows for a critical approach. The growth of the clergy's power has not always been accepted without debate, even within clerical and religious circles. Here, I will discuss some contemporary debates on the role of the clergy, before turning to filmic discourses on the topic.

It was not just opponents of the Revolution who criticised the clergy for arrogating to themselves the power to rule. Rather, from very early on, when the notion of a ruling cleric was first introduced there were those within the clergy who disagreed with the idea, maintaining that it was better to leave the running of the state to kings. As Keddie observes, 'many of the disagreements now found amongst scholars in the West concerning the role of the ulama at various times have their roots in the fact that there was almost never a single line followed by all the ulama, and hence it is often possible to quote ulama, even during one period, on several sides of the same issue' (Keddie, 1995: 164). As Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, a reformist cleric in Iran explains, 'It cannot be said that the clergy collectively are coterminous with the Islamic Republic' (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 119).

Difficult as it was to criticise the religious establishment in the political climate of the Islamic Republic, it did not remain unchallenged. For instance, Ayatollah Shariat-madari was the first *marja'* to criticise the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih,* which resulted in his defrocking in 1982 and subsequent house arrest until his death in 1986. After the Revolution, even those who had proposed the idea of a ruling clergy

came, in time, to revise their views, for example on the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*. As this notion developed over the years, differences of opinion arose even among those clerics who had initially supported it. Ayatollah Montazeri, Khomeini's designated heir, is yet another example. Even though he 'played an instrumental role in inserting the *velayat-e faqih* into the constitution' he was later dismissed for being critical of governmental policies and practices as well as being unwilling to 'keep silent in the face of what [he] saw to be contrary to his religious beliefs' (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 20-21).

Moreover, a new religious modernist movement emerged from 'within the same ideological circles that shaped the revolution' (Jahanbakhsh, 2001: 140). This intellectual movement, headed by Abdolkarim Soroush, questioned the religious establishment and the power that the clergy had given themselves. Mir-Hosseini (2006: 27) discusses the influence of Soroush's theory of the relativity of religious knowledge on numerous intellectuals who came to form the foundation of New Religious Thinking in Iran. These included Mashallah Shamsolvaezin and Shahla Sherkat, editors of *Kiyan* and *Zanan* respectively. Both these monthly journals were established in 1991 and became a platform for Islamic dissent within Iran. *Kiyan* published many of Soroush's articles and speeches, including his article, *'Horriyat va rowhaniyat'* [Freedom and the Clerical Establishment], which questioned the clerical monopoly of religious truth and refuted the clergy's claims to be the sole interpreters of religious knowledge.[18] Soroush, a close ally of the Islamic Republic during its conception and early years, turned into one of its most outspoken critics.

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[18] For a detailed list of Soroush's speeches and articles in both Persian and English see his website www.drsoroush.com

He has since been disfavoured for his criticism of the theological, philosophical and political underpinnings of the regime. He subsequently lost his job, was barred from teaching, and received numerous death-threats. His public lectures were violently disrupted on many occasions and he ultimately left Iran in the mid 90s to write and lecture in Europe and North America. His current visits to Iran are brief and he has refrained from public speeches.

Soroush criticised the clerics' monopoly of Islam and voiced his concerns over the power of the religious seminaries, or *howzehs,* and their close connection with the centre of power. In a talk he gave in 1992 at the University of Isfahan, he said:

> After the revolution the clergy took over the nation's management and formulated its governing political theory (the guardianship of the juriconsult), which requires a Hawzeh-trained clergyman with the rank of the grand juriconsult to be the supreme leader of the country...it is self-evident that the religious government entails the empowerment of the clergy and the Hawzeh; the religious disciples actually empower those who possess them (Soroush, 2000: 174).

Soroush argues that historically this empowerment of the clergy and their claim to be the sole interpreters of religion have been one of the main areas of contention between the clergy and the philosophers, mystics and poets who did accept this claim. He goes on to state the numerous instances in which the latter group have denounced the power alliances of the juriconsults, and the associated dangers of corruption and abuse (Soroush, 2000: 174-175).

More recently, in October 2000, another cleric, Hasan Yousefi Eshkevari, was charged with 'apostasy, waging war against God, and other offences resulting from his participation in the [2000 Berlin] conference' (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006:

38). From 6th-9th April 2000 Eshkevari along with a number of prominent reformists attended the Berlin Conference titled 'Iran after the Elections, and the Dynamics of Reform in the Islamic Republic'. The conference was disrupted by two groups of exiled Iranian opposition groups abroad and as Mir-Hosseini and Tapper state, the conference 'became notorious in Iran for two things: disruptions by "naked" men and women, and the outspokenness of some of the panellists from Iran' both of which were filmed by the Iranian Television (IRIB) crew, under the conservatives' control (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 37). The carefully edited film was broadcast in Iran, to bring the reformists into disrepute. Many of the participants, including Eshkevari, were arrested upon their return to Iran.

Eshkevari's outspoken views on the mutability of social rulings brought him a death sentence, later commuted to five years in prison. Eshkevari identifies three problems with the Islamic Republic's current form. First, it broke its promise to the people and instead of being an Islamic Republic, it is now a clerical Republic. The second is that the Islamic government became a *fiqhi* and, therefore, sectarian government for it relied solely on the Shi'i school of thought. This, he stated, is different from a religious government that is not solely confined to the Shi'i *fiqh* in all its affairs, including 'decision-making in the executive, the legislative and the judicial powers' (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 115), for which there is not always an answer in *fiqh*. It also excludes the four schools of Sunni thought and the possibility of their co-existence, for it deems them irrelevant to a society which in fact does include Sunni Muslims. The third problem was that, for the first time in history, the Shi'a institution of *marja'iyat* became a governmental institution. As a result, the *marja's* lost their independence from the government and subsequently their independence

from the political development of the state. Instead, he asserts, the *marja'*s, who were subjects until recently, have become rulers (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 111- 119).

The clergy's growth of authority over the years made them powerful as never before. However, historically, not all clerics endorsed the idea of endowing the clergy with various religious or political powers. The differences between the *usuli* and *akhbari* schools of thought in the 19th century were one example of disagreement on the religious empowerment of the clergy. In fact, the clergy were never unanimous in their views, particularly when their right to rule was concerned. Thus, not only did the Islamic Republic develop the most nuanced arguments on the legitimacy of the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, it also unwittingly produced some of its finest intellectuals, who critically engaged with the doctrine. These critics were not limited to a small group of secular intellectuals but, more strikingly, extended to many who arose from within the allies of the regime, including some of the clergy.

The relative freedom of expression attained during the initial years of Khatami's presidency (1997-2005) provided the space for a more open debate. Arjomand (2000) states that the reconstitution of the Expediency Council in early 1997 and its role as an advisory board on major policies of the regime, was in fact a demotion of the president, who subsequently lost his power to determine state policies. Despite the difficulty of implementing new legislation, Khatami succeeded in reopening discussion of constitutional principles, and his Government Spokesman and Minister of Culture at the time, Ataollah Mohajerani, withdrew many of the restrictions on the press. This provided space for open debate and 'most importantly of all, the taboo on

the discussion and questioning of the principle of theocratic government in the press, was broken for good' (Arjomand, 2000: 288).

However, any criticism of clerical power and its legitimacy was forcefully suppressed. Nevertheless, the harsh clampdown on publications that disseminated such 'seditious' views, and the arrest and intimidation of their authors, did little to suppress the ideas. Shahidi refers to the period between 1997-2000 as a time during which the greatest achievement of the Iranian press was to introduce 'concepts such as "citizenship", "civil society", "pluralism", "transparency", "accountability", and "the rights of women, children, and minorities" into the country's political vocabulary' (Shahidi, 2006: 24). It is in this context of larger intellectual debates about the current role of the clergy in Iran that we must locate *The Lizard* and *Under the Moonlight* and study their significance

Parable on the World of the Clergy

Both *Under the Moonlight* and *The Lizard* function as parables. They not only depict the world of the clergy in its current form within Iranian society, but also include a moral vision of how it ought to be. The analysis I use here is similar to the mythological approach outlined in Chapter One. Through Seyyed's eyes in *Under the Moonlight* and Reza's in *The Lizard,* we enter these two worlds and are at once presented with the contradictions between the two. In examining the current role of the clergy, these filmic discourses evoke the debates of intellectuals who have critically engaged with the doctrines that empower the clergy. Interestingly, even though both films discuss many similar issues, *Under the Moonlight* was screened

without much controversy whereas *The Lizard* was forced to pull out of cinemas within a month.

Religion serving the clergy

Under the Moonlight is the first post-Revolutionary film that critically examines the status of the clergy within society. It is about a young seminarian, Seyyed Hasan, who is approaching the end of his studies at the seminary and preparing to don clerical attire. He appears hesitant to take on the clerical role, and only half-heartedly proceeds with the preparations because of persistent pressures from his father and teachers. However, a street urchin, Joojeh, steals his supplies and Seyyed's pursuit of the boy leads him to an unfamiliar world of social outcasts who have set up a makeshift camp under a highway bridge in Tehran.

Under the Moonlight begins with a contrast between the life of the clergy and that of the public. As Seyyed, the seminarian student, looks out of the window of an over-crowded, hot, public bus, he sees a cleric on the highway waiting for his driver to finish a tyre-change. Such comparative sequences are scattered throughout the film and illustrate the difference between the upper world of the seminary in which Seyyed resides and the lower world of the under-bridge camp where the outcasts live. The sheltered life of the seminarian students, within the confines of an elegant edifice replete with beautiful gardens and ponds, is in stark contrast to the rough lives of the homeless. This is particularly evident in the case of the child character Joojeh who, in the guise of a street vendor, steals and traffics in drugs in order to earn a living. We also see some of the clerics acting against what they preach. The

hypocrisy of the senior cleric is emphasised by the juxtaposition of his complaints about the seminary's electricity bill as a waste of money and, therefore, against the ethical principles of Islam, with his desire to obtain a mobile phone despite its extra cost. He is depicted in various scenes throughout the film either going through invoices and bills, or being constantly on his mobile phone arranging or closing deals.

Soroush has variously criticised the clergy's dependence on religion as a source of income. He states that the clergy 'are not defined by their erudition or their virtues but their dependency on religion for their livelihood' (Soroush, 2000: 19). For him, being a cleric must not constitute a job or profession, for religion then becomes a means to an end. Consequently, instead of defending and pursuing religious knowledge, the clergy are in danger of defending their professional interests to maximise their income. He thus argues that

> individuals who represent the greatest potential for corruption are those who, after receiving their religious education, base their livelihood on the cultivation and defense of a particular notion of Islam. Their livelihood depends upon the successful advancement of this religious interpretation, and to maximize the former they may compromise the latter (Vakili, 1997: 17).

In *Under the Moonlight,* the clergy seem to be more concerned to maintain their façade than to strive towards the value systems they preach. The senior cleric, for example, complains about seminarian students who drink Coke on the streets together or grow their hair long, and asserts that this is unbecoming for a cleric in robe. However, when faced with the suffering of people such as the homeless, he prefers to close his eyes. In the senior cleric's view, it is the times that have changed and Seyyed should not feel responsible for any of it. He says, 'It was not supposed to

be this way. I don't know where we went wrong or which sin we are paying off.' In fact, he exempts himself from taking any action by delegating these social problems to Divine Will and reading them as acts of punishment. The film, therefore, subtly depicts the deviation of the clergy's concern from the wellbeing of society to a self-centred preservation of their status.

The clergy thus appear to have forgotten an important part of their duty. They have failed to look out for those in need. The homeless living under the bridge are a 'collection' as they call themselves. They have both the physically and mentally disabled amongst themselves, and a leader figure called Rostam. As his name indicates, Rostam acts as a *javanmard* in the group, a man of integrity, honour and chivalry. As Adelkhah states in her detailed analysis of the social and ethical code of *javanmardi* in modern-day Iran, one of the older references of *javanmard* is to a selfless man 'possessing fully the quality of a man (*mardanegi*), referring to his courage, honour, modesty, humility and rectitude' (1999: 30). Rostam evokes the physical strength and championship of his namesake in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh,* the 10th-century Persian epic. The Rostam of *Shahnameh* is one of its best-known heroes, a great warrior and champion. The Rostam of *Under the Moonlight* was a wrestler in his younger days, around whom crowds would gather to watch him break free from heavy chains. His self-effacement, another important component of a *javanmard,* is also evident in the way he looks out for the welfare of his friends and shares what little he has with them. In fact, despite their miserable conditions, the people in the group care for each other deeply. Indeed, the love and care shown by and amongst these outcasts by far exceeds that of the world of the seminary. Many other Iranian films have also highlighted the plight of the underprivileged. However,

Under the Moonlight differs from them in that the destitute conditions of the poor are contrasted, not with the affluent living in the north of Tehran, but with the clergy in the seminary.

This contrast can also be read as a subtle reference to the unrealised dream of social justice promised by Khomeini before and during the early days of the Revolution. Khomeini had pledged to defend the rights of the oppressed classes (*mostaza'fin)* by bringing in social justice and narrowing the social gap between the rich and poor. Even though proposals on the welfare of the oppressed were drafted and put to the first parliament of the Islamic Republic, they remained ultimately unsustainable in the social and political climate of the Revolution.[19] However, the social and financial status of close allies of the regime, including some clergy, continued to improve noticeably.

Under the Moonlight thus highlights the marginalisation and alienation of the very same people who were promised a just rule by the Islamic Republic. Not only have the rights of these people not been defended, but their living conditions have also deteriorated – a point evident from their nostalgic references to the past. Their presence in the film is, therefore, a reference to the dark reality of the conditions of the marginalised and the failure of the Revolution to fulfil its promise of social justice.

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[19] For a comprehensive account of the economic situation during the early years of the Revolution, see Ehteshami (1995: 88-99).

Clergy serving the public

Even though *Under the Moonlight* is critical of the current position of the clergy in Iran, it does not in any way attempt to denounce the religious institutions or the clergy per se. Instead it reflects on the purpose and role of the clergy in society, which appear to have been misunderstood not only by the public but also by some of the clergy themselves. Seyyed's grandfather serves as an example of the noble role of the clergy. He, and not the seminarian teachers, remains an inspiration to Seyyed. We learn that the grandfather was a simple man who lived in the village and earned his living by working on the fields. He practiced what he preached and was, therefore, a trusted member of the community in which he lived. For him, the good of society took precedence over his personal interests. As Seyyed himself puts it, his reluctance to don clerical robes stems from a fear of not deserving the honour. It is clear that for him, the honour lies in humbly serving the people, and he fears being incapable of fulfilling this noble calling.

Most importantly, this film revolves around Seyyed's search. As such, he interprets the unfolding of events as a Divine sign. Thus, when Joojeh steals his supplies, he initially considers it as God's way of telling him not to proceed with finalising his education as a cleric. However, his search for Joojeh turns into the spiritual journey through which he finally realises his purpose in life. Interestingly, this is achieved after Rostam includes Seyyed in his letter to God asking Him to answer their pleas. Seyyed wakes up the next morning under the open-topped dome of the mosque with a white dove flying out into the light.

When Seyyed fails to appear at the donning ceremony, his roommate, who has already worn the clerical robes, hurries to try and persuade Seyyed to join him. He dismisses Seyyed's justifications and sounds the real reason: it is clear that Seyyed is hesitant because he has become suspicious of the clergy. As his roommate says, 'Do you think they are royal robes? No! They are working clothes! There are good and bad people in all types of work, why don't you try and be one of the good ones? You used to say that even if you are able to guide one person, then you must wear the robe!'

The phrase 'royal robes', can be read as a reference to the dissident clerics who criticise those within the clergy who have taken on royal lifestyles. Ayatollah Montazeri had also voiced his concerns on the royal robes of the *vali-ye faqih.*[20] Breaking nearly ten years of political silence in November 1997, a few months after Khatami's landslide victory in the presidential elections, he gave a sermon in Qom criticising the corruption of the *velayat-e faqih* and the justifications for its authoritarian rule. In his words, '*Velayat-e faqih* does not mean having a royal organisation and ceremonial travels that cost billions and the like. These things are not compatible with the *vali-ye faqih*' (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 105).

Kadivar, another dissident cleric and a senior student of Montazeri, who spent a few years in the prisons of the Islamic Republic for his criticism of the doctrine of *vali-ye faqih,* compares the Islamic Republic with the absolute monarchy they had intended

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[20] Menashri (2001: 13-41) discusses the debates over *marja'iyat*, particularly the opposition of clerical and lay intellectuals that followed Khamene'i's appointment as supreme leader after Khomeini.

to end.[21] The Islamic Republic, he states, failed to eliminate monarchical oppression and instead 'succeeded in transforming the face of monarchy in Iran; autocratic rule and monarchical relations have remained intact, and are reproduced in the form of the absolute *velayat-e faqih'* (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 109). In comparing democratic rule with that of the *velayat-e faqih*, he states that the rule of the *faqih* does not provide the public with equal access to power within the public domain and subsequently alienates them within this sphere (Kadivar, 2002).

The parable of The Lizard

Even though *The Lizard* is a different film to *Under the Moonlight*, in both genre and approach, the issues it raises are very similar. *The Lizard* is about a convicted thief, Reza, known as Reza Marmulak or Reza the Lizard. When he is taken to hospital after an attempted suicide in prison, he succeeds in stealing the robes of a cleric hospitalised next to him. The rest of the film is about Reza's attempts to escape the country and being trapped in the role of a cleric. Like *Under the Moonlight*, *The Lizard* functions as a parable. It also examines the relevance of theological reasoning to everyday real life. In addition, it explores the role of the clergy, their relationship with laity, and the notion of forced religious morals.

The storyline of *The Lizard* is a familiar comedy plot of the incongruity of displacement. A criminal dressed as a cleric and forced to act as one had been depicted in various earlier films, going as far back as Charlie Chaplin's 1923 film

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[21] Kadivar (1998, 1999a and 1999b). On Kadivar, see Vahdat (2005). For a detailed list of Kadivar's speeches and summary of articles in Persian visit www.Kadivar.com

The Pilgrim, which, like *The Lizard,* told a very similar story of an escaped convict grabbing the clothes of a bathing clergyman and subsequently assuming his identity. However, as Butler states, during its time it was received with a 'shocked indignation' in some parts (1969: 181). Over 80 years later, this storyline still caused heated reactions amongst audiences, authorities and particularly the clergy, in Iran.

The Lizard was never officially banned but the stir it caused was enough for its creators to decide to take it off the screens. However, this did not entail defeat. The film had already succeeded on so many different levels that its withdrawal from the cinema screens did little to damage it. Financially, the film had already made a significant profit.[22] It also won several awards in the 22nd FIFF (2004): the audience award for the most popular film, the best screenplay, and the special jury award for its lead character, Parviz Parastooyi, as well as the Interfaith Juries award.[23] It successfully spoke to the largest-ever Iranian audience on a sensitive issue such as the clergy. Additionally, even though it was aimed at domestic audiences, it succeeded in transcending national and cultural borders, becoming the first Iranian comedy to participate in some of the best-known international film festivals.[24] It also

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[22] The BBC NEWS reports that by the time *The Lizard* opened in America, it had already made $1 million in Iran, with cinemas being forced to schedule extra screenings to meet the huge demand. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/entertainment/3786905.stm, visited 9 June 2004.

[23] For a list of the awards of the 22nd Fajr International Film Festival, see the official website: http://www.fajrfestival.ir/english/fajr/asp/awards.asp?f_number=22.

[24] Including The Times BFI 48th London Film Festival (2004). Parviz Parastooyi, the lead character of the film, was the 4th runner-up for best actor in the Seattle International Film Festival (19 May – 12 June 2005), the biggest international film festival in the US: http://www.seattlefilm.org/festival/film/detail.aspx?id=5222&fid=5. The film was

introduced a different style of Iranian films to foreign audiences. As some non-Iranian audiences commented, they were pleased to finally see an Iranian film which not only had a tight narrative but also was not depressing![25]

The Lizard became the first post-Revolutionary film to position a cleric as the subject of a comedy. Even though it went on screen only for a month, it became the biggest box-office hit in the history of Iranian cinema.[26] The real audience of this film, however, exceeded the box-office figures. Very soon pirated copies were circulating and almost everyone in the country had seen it. The images of an irreligious convict pretending to be a man of God and leading the faithful made for some of the most humorous moments in film. However, the film aroused such fury amongst the clerics that they refused to acknowledge even its redemptive side, which allowed for a more favourable view of the clergy. Tabrizi, the director, narrates that in his attempts to gain the clergy's approval he arranged a private screening for them and their families.[27] He wanted them to see for themselves that the film was not hostile to the clergy. They were not convinced. Even though their families found it funny and were laughing heartily during the screening, the clerics seated on the other side failed to see the humour.

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also screened in the Asia 2004 Fukuoka International Film Festival (10 - 20 September 2004), see http://www.focus-on-asia.com/e/report/2004/The-Lizard.html

[25] The author spoke with some non-Iranian members of the audience after the screening of the film at the London Film Festival.

[26] "It has now become the most successful Iranian film ever following its release in the US" (http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/entertainment/3786905.stm, visited 9 June 2004.)

[27] Interview with the author in Iran on February 2005.

Like *Under the Moonlight, The Lizard* is also a social commentary critical of the clergy's position within society. It is, however, more daring in its approach. The film is filled with bold references that criticise the current approach to religion and its enforcement within society. Reza the lizard had become Reza the cleric. In Persian, 'lizard' has many connotations. Even though it appears to be a reference to Reza's artistry in climbing up walls, one cannot miss its other overtones. Lizard also refers to a sly, scheming person who can easily change colours. This reference in the film could be easily stretched to the clergy.

The creators of *The Lizard* employed film to step on uncharted territory. As King puts it, 'Comedy, by definition, is not usually taken seriously, a fact that sometimes gives it licence to tread in areas that might otherwise be off-limits' (2002: 2). As mentioned earlier, the film functions as a parable and through Reza's eyes we enter both the ideal and the real worlds of the clergy. In the world as it is, Reza benefits from a privileged status within society. He is easily exempted from paying a fine for driving in the wrong direction, and he enjoys special treatment on the train. Nevertheless, this status is also accompanied by public contempt for the clergy. For example, when dressed in clerical robes Reza finds it difficult to get a taxi to stop for him.

The world as it ought to be, however, is one that places the clergy and laity on level ground. Reza demonstrates this through his interaction with the people around him. Even if unwittingly, he succeeds in drawing people back to the mosque and gaining their respect. We see a world in which the clergy inspire and lead people to participate in the good of society, defending the helpless and weak against injustice,

and tolerating human faults and weakness. Reza Marmulak, forced to act as the cleric of the village, is unable to get in touch with Motazedi, the underground criminal who is supposed to deliver his fake passport for him to cross the border. Thus, during the day he dresses as a cleric and at night, 'disguised' in ordinary clothes, he looks for Motazedi. When Reza finally finds Motazedi's house, he finds that Motazedi has been arrested and imprisoned. The inquisitive Gholamali and his friend secretly follow Marmulak and witness not only his various visits to houses in the deprived areas but also the prayers of Motazedi's mother, who thanks him for his generosity. They interpret this 'disguised' nocturnal roaming as charitable work to help the needy. This also alludes to following the example of 'Ali, the first Shi'i Imam, and his charitable acts. Indeed, 'Ali would roam the city at night in disguise and take food and sustenance to the orphans and needy. When Gholamali and his friends spread the word, the village people are so moved that they implore Marmulak to allow them to participate in his good deeds. Thus, every night they visit the poor, sick and needy and provide them with gifts and company.

Reza also displays an acute sense of justice and chivalry. He is furious with the village thugs who harass the village shopkeeper and vandalise his property, but feels it inappropriate to fight off the thugs whilst in his robes. However, he can no longer hold his peace when he finds out that the leader of the local gang of thugs has locked himself in with his ex-wife, Faezeh, to try and bully her into getting back together. To the villagers' astonishment he climbs the walls to the second floor and lets himself into the house. The villagers are then faced with a bleeding ex-husband who, despite his mass, has been clearly beaten up by the cleric. This wins Reza an even

further popularity, for now even the thugs and their leader develop a great respect for him.

In this visionary world, the cleric earns respect and achieves leadership not through preaching about punishment and fear, or by legal enforcement, but rather by setting an example himself. In fact, towards the end of the film, Reza ceases even to sit on the pulpit. Instead, he sits on its lowest step and suggests that together they should think about the meaning of the plural ways of reaching God. In his sermons, he invites people to enjoy the pleasures of life. His teachings are not in opposition to human desire but he does advise a more careful handling of such instinctual desire. Thus, in contrast to Gholamali's father, who is concerned that singing in the mosque or interaction with the opposite sex constitute impermissible acts, Reza decrees them as permissible.

The visionary world is not limited to Reza acting as a man of God. As illustrated at the beginning of the film, his short interaction with the cleric in the hospital, also called Reza, provides an image of the clergy as it ought to be. This cleric does not arrogate to himself special privileges, evident in that he has been hospitalised in a public hospital and the fact that he earns a living through craftsmanship. As discussed earlier, Soroush emphasises the need for the clergy to earn their living through sources other than religious activity in order to maintain their integrity with the faith. The cleric in the hospital does not distance himself from Reza the Lizard, nor does he scorn the latter's contempt for the clergy. The inspirational passages he reads are not from Islamic sources but from Antoine de Saint-Exupery's *The Little*

Prince. Truth, he says, is not found only in one source, but experienced through multiple interpretations.

In a theocratic state endorsing an exclusivist and official interpretation of Islam, *The Lizard* proposed a pluralistic approach – an argument comparable to Soroush's ideas of multiple interpretations of Islam. In a speech given at London's Centre for the Study of Democracy in November 2006, Soroush asserted that Islam is nothing but a series of interpretations, and interpretations are intrinsically pluralistic. However, those who have based their power on a particular interpretation of Islam are reluctant to allow other interpretations, and reject them as heresy. The pluralism of interpretation is, nevertheless, inevitable and he argues that the clerics need to engage with this aspect of Islam. Since there is no 'True' interpretation, one can correct and modify the existing ones but it is then logically impossible to possess the best interpretation. As such, Soroush proposed a plurality of 'right paths' rather than 'One Right Path'.

Both *Under the Moonlight* and *The Lizard* are social commentaries protesting not the relevance of the clergy in a believer's life, but rather criticising the role that some of them have currently undertaken in society. What Mirkarimi and Tabrizi, the two filmmakers, achieve in their respective films is to raise many of these controversial issues and question the positions held by the clergy. As demonstrated in the discussion above, these discourses fall into the larger body of works that question the legitimacy of clerical power and role in society. The ideas these filmmakers propose draw from the thought of intellectuals such as Soroush, Kadivar and Eshkevari, but are expressed through the medium of film.

Morals and Values

Seyyed's spiritual search and his hesitation at taking on the role of the clergy is depicted beautifully in *Under the Moonlight.* When he wakes up under the dome of the mosque, the white dove flying into the light and the satisfaction on his face suggest a search about to be fulfilled. That day Seyyed sells his books to feed the homeless, a symbolic act of carrying out the instructions in these books, rather than merely reading them in the confines of his seminary. A few days later, when the city cleaners are commissioned to clear the camp under the bridge, a heart-broken Seyyed complains to God, cries to him and sings to him, in a manner reminiscent of Rostam's unsophisticated and informal conversation with God.

Relevance of seminarian teachings

Another important point that both films raise is the relevance of seminarian teaching and the Sharia to real-life situations. In *Under the Moonlight,* having witnessed the desperate situation of the street urchin, Joojeh, and his friends, it is very difficult to empathise with the seminarians advocating strict adherence to the principle of chopping off the hands of thieves. The impossibility of following all the prescribed rules in daily life is further demonstrated amongst the seminarians themselves. In fact, the ideals of the new student at the seminary, who zealously follows the religious texts, provide the comic relief of the film. For example, when the fervid student reminds Seyyed and his roommate that the religious texts consider having eggs at night to be reprehensible (*makruh),* Seyyed's friend adds some tomato sauce

and supposedly removes the reprehension from the act, turning it into a permissible one.

The Lizard also questions the relevance of seminarian teachings to real life. This is depicted through the constant questioning of the keen young man shadowing Reza Marmulak. Most of these questions are completely irrelevant to Iranians, such as daily prayers at the North Pole or the religious duties of a Muslim in Space. The film thus subtly implies that some of the current religious discourses are far removed from the practical affairs of life and are, therefore, of little use to society. The clergy's engagement with these matters is thus seen as being not only pointless but also as distant from the laity as Iran is from the North Pole or Space. The film therefore suggests that people's more immediate problems could be dealt with in a way that better bridges the gap between real life and the values and ideals held dear by society.

As mentioned before, among other 'crimes' for which Eshkevari was sentenced to death, was questioning the relevance of religious rulings within today's context especially as they pertained to women. In fact he asserted that some social rulings were mutable, for they were Arab and tribal customs. Appropriated by the Prophet, they were, therefore, subject to review. Thus, they were no longer considered to be absolute and divine decrees incumbent on Muslims, but rather changeable laws that should be reviewed within their time and place. In the controversial Berlin Speech of 2000, Eshkevari divided social rulings into two categories. He allocated the first to rulings about worship and classified them as irrevocable. On the second he said:

> I would claim that these social rulings of Islam are mutable in essence and by their very nature, even if parts of them come from the Koran...In Islamic *fiqh* we have a

> principle that says that the ruling follows the subject matter...It means that when a subject matter changes, the rulings too will change. But if the subject matter remains unchanged, the ruling will not change (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper, 2006: 165).

Eshkevari then goes on to propose a reconsideration of certain social laws from being irrevocable principles to becoming changeable laws. In this way, religious rules were not divine rules but rather social contracts that could be changed in line with the needs of time and context. It was his specific proposal that these mutable rules included women's rights and the choice to wear the hijab that the ruling clerics could not accept for ideological reasons.

In certain circumstances in the films, the very knowledge of the clergy is deemed irrelevant to the life of the laity. For example, on his first encounter with the homeless people, Seyyed is asked for the spelling of a word. He begins with providing the spelling, the etymology and root of the word, but the destitute man cuts him short. He is not interested. Seyyed's learning is irrelevant to this man's problems – he just needs the spelling that any educated person should be able to provide.

God, however, remains a central part in the lives of both the seminarian and the homeless even though they differ drastically in their relationship with Him. The clergy employ a rigid and formal relationship with God in the form of prayers, worship, and praising of His attributes. The homeless people on the other hand, employ a very casual vocabulary in speaking with Him. Rostam, who firmly believes in God and His kindness, is not afraid to use slang to protest against injustices inflicted upon the homeless. He dictates a letter to God and after complaining about

His negligence of them, outlines a list of things they need from Him and includes Seyyed's name in it. As discussed earlier, according to the dominant Shi'i theology since the 19th century, the ulama had taken on the role of intermediaries between God and the believers. In this case, however, Rostam demonstrates his free and direct relationship with God and ironically, he acts as an intermediary between God and Seyyed. Interestingly, Seyyed finds the answer to his search the very next morning. In *The Lizard,* Reza, the convict-acting-as-a-cleric, summarises the film's view on the laity's relationship with God in his sermon at the local prison. He states that God cannot be monopolised by good people. Instead, He is also the God of criminals, who does not differentiate amongst His men. Evil, in fact, occurs through the selfish acts of those who are unwilling to share their good fortunes with the less fortunate.

These two films as a whole advocate a definition of God that is not bound to theological reasoning but rather, based on unconditional love and faith. One of the points of departure between mystics and the ulama has been the relationship of the believer with God. Rumi, the 13th-century Persian poet, and one of the greatest mystics of Islam, in his *Mathnavi* (verses 1727-1791) narrates the story of Moses and the Shepherd. Moses overhears an illiterate shepherd praying to God and imploring Him to come out of hiding so that he can demonstrate his love for him, and feed Him, massage His feet, comb His hair and mend His shoes. Moses rebukes the shepherd for using blasphemous language and the shepherd is devastated to realise that his expression of love and devotion are considered sacrilegious. But Moses receives a revelation reproaching him for distancing His sincere believer from Him and continuing: *You were sent to join together, not to cause rift and disunion.*

Rumi endorses this sincere and direct relationship with God that is independent of the mediation of the jurisprudents. As Soroush states, this recognition that there is an understanding beyond scholarly learning has long been a struggle between the mystics and the jurisconsults. 'The quarrel of some philosophers, mystics, and poets with the jurisconsults has not been merely academic but has been based on real differences of perspective on religious issues' (Soroush, 2000: 174).

One of the reasons for Reza's success as a cleric in *The Lizard* is that he succeeds in communicating with people in their own language. Soroush highlights the importance of the seminary's task in training effective speakers and states that the preachers must be:

> able to guide the people using simple and accessible language, fables, examples and poems in order to convey moral commands, religious wisdom, and catechismic principles. There is now no faculty in the seminaries dedicated to the art of preaching even though this is one of the duties of the Hawzeh; this vocation falls to the talent and initiative of individuals (Soroush, 2000: 175)

Forced religious morals

From the outset, *The Lizard* criticises the forced religious morals within Iranian society. This is depicted through the prison warden who wants to send his prisoners to heaven even if by force, as well as Gholamali's father who constantly pressures his son to memorise the Qur'an. The thick glasses of the soldier who carries out the warden's orders represent a blind following of the edicts. Interestingly, the new seminarian in *Under the Moonlight*, who is a strict observer of the literal interpretation of the religious law, also wears thick glasses. They both represent people with a narrow view of the world, one that is not gained, reasoned or drawn

from experience, but rather handed down to them. These are people who receive the prescribed orders without giving them any further thought, or considering their relevance to the real world. In short, they are unable to see for themselves.

The notion of serving the public is also studied critically within contemporary Iranian society. Serving is either interpreted as punishment or abused for personal interests. The prison warden in *The Lizard,* for example, serves the prisoners through his dictatorial regime, and the police officer defines his service to the public as catching thieves and putting them into prison. Punishment, therefore, is seen as a tool of service. The parliamentary candidate on the other hand indulges in acts of generosity and service only to facilitate the fulfilment of his ambitions. The film also questions those who totally engross themselves in religious learning and subsequently distance themselves from society and service to it. As evidenced by Gholamali's father, it is more important that his son memorise the Qur'an than set out on nocturnal missions serving the people and helping the needy.

The films also compare the ethical values of the laity with the enforced and institutionalised moral standards of the state. For example, *The Lizard* humanises both the clergy and the criminals, but in different ways. The criminals are not evil but help out each other in times of difficulty. Jackson, the underworld criminal and Reza Marmulak's friend, helps him to escape the borders. Motazedi, who fakes passports, honours his word. As his mother says, she has brought up her child with an appropriate understanding of the forbidden and permissible acts (*halal* and *haram*). He earns his money, even if it is through unlawful work. The hospitalised cleric who helps Reza the Lizard and is an exemplar of the clergy as they ought to

be, does not believe in punishment as a solution and is in fact complicit in the Lizard's escape. Later, when Reza Marmulak is forced to act as a cleric, his namesake, the cleric in the hospital, remains an important inspiration for him.

In *Under the Moonlight*, the God-fearing seminarians who have devoted their lives to the worship of God and study of the sacred texts, show little engagement with the laity outside and are almost oblivious to their suffering. The dwellers under the bridge, on the other hand, are compassionate despite being 'sinners', petty criminals, and drug-dealers. Joojeh's sister, a prostitute who attempts suicide, has already committed two of the 'great sins'. However, after being saved by Seyyed, who takes her to hospital, she in turn becomes an instrument of his salvation. Just before the enrobing ceremony, which he is unwilling to attend, while his roommate is trying to persuade him otherwise, she delivers a parcel that contains his stolen garb – a sign that alludes to his ability to save souls.

We then see Seyyed finally dressed in the clerical robes and on his way to save Joojeh. Seyyed, a humble man who is deeply concerned with the suffering of the world around him, proceeds to take Joojeh out of the young offenders institution where he is imprisoned. Seyyed asks to read his hand, the same trick that Joojeh had used to rob him of his supplies. This last sequence bears one of the most powerful shots of the film. He speaks in Joojeh's vocabulary and affectionately tells him that he is going to take him out of the prison and to his village with him. There is no hint of preaching or use of theological jargon in Seyyed's talk. Indeed, he believes in guiding Joojeh through love rather than disciplining him by cutting his hand off, an emphasis on saving the soul rather than punishing the body.

In *The Lizard*, the robe is seen as a taming device, as Reza Marmulak refers to it at the end of the film. However, it does not so much transform Reza as give him an opportunity to bring to the surface the best of his qualities. It does not in and of itself provide Reza with morals and values. In fact, from the very outset of the film it is clear that even though Reza is a criminal and has forgotten how to pray formally, he is not an immoral person or someone without values. Despite being convicted of armed robbery, he has never touched a weapon and considers bearing arms outside his principles. Even though he is not an outwardly practising Muslim, he has his own Islamic principles – he does not steal during the holy months of Ramadan, Muharram and Safar. He does not endorse the unequal treatment of women or the hypocritical attitude of some men, who use religious sanctions to satisfy their sexual desires. In fact, he employs *fiqh* terminology to strongly condemn these acts. He does really pay Motazedi's mother out of kindness when he finds out that her son and sole bread-winner has been imprisoned. He does not abuse the trust of Faezeh, the young woman, even though he is obviously very attracted to her. Instead, he gives up a golden opportunity for spending some time alone with her, to her ex-husband. He sacrifices his own desires to her best interests: Faezeh might have a future with her ex-husband, but not with him. In some instances, the robe is more an impediment to his values than a vehicle to serve. For example, when the thugs beat up the old shopkeeper, Reza mumbles, 'If only Islam had not tied up my hands!' In short, his involvement with religion had provided him with an opportunity to lead a more meaningful and purposeful life.

Conclusions

Both *Under the Moonlight* and *The Lizard* critically examine the role and status of the clergy, but neither of them outrightly accept or reject the religious institutions. The filmic discourses are in fact a continuation of an ongoing debate in Iran. Like Soroush, Eshkevar and Kadivar, the filmmakers Mirkarimi and Tabrizi articulate their positions from a religious viewpoint. The films do not endorse the notion of clergy as men of power with unlimited authority over people's private and public lives, nor do they deem the clergy irrelevant to modern day Iranian society. Instead, they are an invitation to review our understanding of religion and its current role in society. In *Under the Moonlight,* Mirkarimi dares to break through the enclosed quarters of the seminary, and with an unapologetic approach examines the relationship of the seminarians with each other and with the outside world, as well as the relevance of their theological understanding to the real world. *The Lizard* highlights the enforcement of one particular interpretation of Islam and contrasts it with a pluralistic approach to the understanding of Islam. They both propose a more fluid relationship between people, the clergy and the Divine that is not confined within the rigid boundaries of the seminarian debates. Even though the films, particularly *The Lizard,* are subversive in that they question the role of the clergy in society, they remain affirmative of the role of religion in one's life.

As I have discussed earlier, 'religion' is an ambiguous term for it comprises a number of interrelated ideas and practices ranging from faith and belief in supernatural powers to organised religion with a hierarchy between specialists and ordinary participants, as well as ritual – collective and stereotyped formal

behaviours, usually in reference to a faith, and often organised by religious specialists. Statements about what 'religion' is or does may be true of only one or two of these three interrelated ideas and practices. Since they form an integrated system, all these various aspects need to be studied in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of 'religion'. Having explored the formalistic approach to religion in this chapter, the next chapter will examine how filmmakers employ film to discuss mystical concepts in a more personal approach to religion.

Chapter 6: Sight, Sound and Sufism: Mystical Islam in Majidi's Films

The energy and buzz of the annual Fajr International Film Festival at the cinema exclusively designated for film critics and journalists is palpable from its very crowded entrance. Frequented by established as well as aspiring film stars, directors, journalists and critics the cinema is a hotbed of gossip and information. Every year, therefore, I took the opportunity to make as many contacts as I could. My efforts also meant that I sometimes had to listen to the running commentary of my new friend sitting next to me during the screenings, whilst desperately trying to concentrate on the film. Distracting as this was, I obtained some of the most interesting information during these interrupted film viewings and the smoggy café breaks. It was during one of these episodes in FIFF 2006 that I learnt about the funding of Majid Majidi's latest feature film *The Willow Tree* (*Bid-e majnun*, 2005).

Majidi is one of Iran's most successful directors and his films have been well received both inside and outside of Iran. He has won numerous national and international awards, with his *Children of Heaven* (*Bacheha-ye aseman*, 1997) and *The Colour of Paradise* (*Rang-e Khoda*, 1999) turning him into a globally acclaimed director. A quick glance at the numerous pages of comments on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), reveal the popularity of his films in the West. His films often depict man's struggle in the face of adversity. Many of the reviews speak of his films as having 'religious' or 'spiritual' overtones. Even without entering into the definitions of these two highly debatable terms one can easily see why Majidi made

a highly suitable candidate to receive funding from Farabi's Spiritual Cinema Centre.

Despite its funding source, *The Willow Tree* appeared in the Iranian Cinema section of the 23rd FIFF, not Spiritual Cinema. I learnt from my informant – a Farabi insider – that Majidi had refused to enter the film in the latter section because he feared the loss of his Iranian audiences at the box office. The label '*ma'nagara*', he believed, would discourage his viewers from seeing the film, and therefore, jeopardise the work. This nugget of information spoke volumes about the dynamics of Iranian cinema and Iranian society at large. It demonstrated how just the branding of a product that reflected the aspirations of the Islamic Republic might lead to public rejection. The threat was serious enough for Majidi, a popular and well-established filmmaker, not to take the risk.

The Willow Tree was nominated in 10 categories in the Festival and won four awards, including Best Director, Best Actor, Best Sound Recording and Audience Choice. Ironically, however, the highest number of awards that year went to one of only two Iranian films in the Spiritual Cinema category – Mirkarimi's *So Far, So Close* (*Kheyli dur, kheyli nazdik,* 2005), which was nominated in 13 categories, won six awards and was the runner-up for the Audience Choice award. It also did well at the box office during general release. Majidi's fears may well have been unfounded.

Regardless of the categories in which they are grouped, Majidi's films are deeply engaged with religious notions and themes. These references, however, are not explicitly religious. Rather, they are filmic depictions of man's struggle towards

spiritual attainment, a discourse that reflects an aspect of Islamic mysticism or Sufi teachings.

As we have seen in Chapter 3, the mystical approach to Islam provides an alternative discourse that allows for a more personal approach than the Islam of the clerics and lawmen. It is misleading to talk about a 'spiritual essence' of Sufism as though this were a trans-historical concept. In fact, such concepts have evolved over time and have been articulated variously by different Sufi masters. With the early expansion of Islam beyond its original Arabian context, Muslims faced various intellectual and social upheavals. Sufism was one such response to these challenges, one that dialogued with new ideas, practices and ways of thought. After the fall of the Mongol Ilkhanids in Iran in the 14th century and the political upheavals that followed, Iran witnessed a spread of Shi'ism and Sufism. The development of Sufi *tariqa*s, or paths, gave rise to popular piety in the veneration of saints and saint cults as well as the hierarchically organised Sufi institutions with special chains of transmission from master to disciple.

There is an array of views on what exactly constitutes mysticism in Islam and whether Sufism is connected to Islam at all. In discussing the difficulties of defining the term 'mysticism', Schimmel recalls the famous story in Rumi's *Mathnawi* about the blind men who were asked to describe what they were touching, without knowing that it was an elephant. Just as each one of them described it differently according to the part of the body that they had touched so, too, has Sufism, the generally accepted name for Islamic mysticism, been defined in different ways (1975: 3). Chittick also argues that one cannot find a consensus within the Islamic

texts as to the definition of the word *sufi* and that 'authors commonly argued about both its meaning and its legitimacy' (2000: 2).

According to Schimmel, mysticism can be defined as 'love of the Absolute – for the power that separates true mysticism from mere asceticism is love. Divine love makes the seeker capable of bearing, even of enjoying, all the pains and afflictions that God showers upon him in order to test him and to purify his soul' (1975: 4). The mystic emphasises the role of the heart in understanding the ineffable reality, which neither reason nor philosophy can reveal (ibid.). Indeed, the Qur'anic verse 53: 11 'The heart did not lie in what it saw' is often invoked as proof 'that the locus of spiritual vision and mystical knowledge is the heart' (Sells, 2007: 45).

In explaining the appeal of Islamic mysticism from the early period of Islam, Mottahedeh states that Muslim mystics

> had created a vivid form of spirituality that grasped the imagination not only of Muslims but also of non-Muslims; and conversion to Islam both within the lands ruled by Muslims and in lands far beyond, whether in Central Asia, Central Africa, or elsewhere, took place more often through the efforts of Sufis than through those of any other representatives of Islam (Mottahedeh, 1985: 146)

As Lings (1996) observes, however, there are those who regard Sufism as independent of Islam, arguing that it has borrowed from other non-Islamic traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, or because the Sufi beliefs and practices, regardless of their origins, do not necessarily fit into their particular definition of Islam. And there are yet others, more recently, who consider themselves to be Sufis but not connected to any religion, let alone Islam. Lings points to thousands in the Western world 'who, while claiming to be 'Sufis', maintain that Sufism is

independent of any particular religion and that it has always existed.' Lings asserts that in doing so, 'they unwittingly reduce it ... [and] ... fail to notice that by robbing it of its particularity and therefore its originality, they also deprive it of all impetus' (1993: 16). For him, therefore, it is quite clear that 'Sufism is nothing other than Islamic mysticism, which means that it is the central and most powerful current of that tidal wave that constitutes the Revelation of Islam' (Lings, 1993: 15).

The authorities of the Islamic Republic, even today, highly disapprove of the term Sufism, condemning its institutions and practices as unIslamic. In order to reconcile with the undeniable existence of esoteric perspectives in Islam—which form an essential part of Persian culture and literature, as discussed in detail in Chapter 3 – the term *'irfan*, loosely translated as gnosis – has become the preferred term in the Islamic Republic. This might be because gnosis does not denote a separate school of thought or institution, and thus does not pose a potential, rival threat to the Islamic Republic's interpretation of Islam and its authority. Rather, it alludes to an independent understanding attained through personal search and practice. Whilst poets such as Rumi and Hafez are renowned, especially in the West, as Sufis, the Islamic Republic refers to them as gnostics (*'urafa, sing. 'arif*). Without delving into detail about which is the more accurate term, it is nevertheless important to note the significance of these mystical approaches to the understanding and practices of Iranians, regardless of whether they are labelled as gnostic or Sufi.

In one of my interviews in 2004 with Abdullah Esfandiyari, head of the Spiritual Centre of the Farabi Foundation, he mentioned the increased appeal of *darvishi*, a Persian term also used to refer to Sufism, particularly since the victory of the Islamic

Republic. He went on to say how these Sufi groups have misled many, abusing their positions and robbing people of their money, with some Sufi masters entering unlawful relations with their female disciples. He said he had seen a documentary where the adherents of these groups had talked about their misfortunes, warning people about the dangers of following Sufi groups. Yet he recognised the appeal of Sufism in the quest for inner meaning. *Ma'nagara* cinema, he said, was an attempt to look at that which is beyond the surface and at the mysteries of the world.

As we have seen, it is almost impossible to be definitive about this. I have used Sufism here to refer to a mystical dimension within Islam that seeks a direct personal experience of the Divine. I will particularly explore some of the Iranian expressions of Sufism as discussed at length in Chapter 3. Here, I examine how Majidi employs the medium of film to articulate mystical concepts such as love, God, suffering and annihilation, and their relevance to the modern-day lives of ordinary people.

Majid Majidi was born in Tehran in 1959, where he studied at the Institute of Dramatic Arts. After the Revolution, he began his career in the performing arts as an actor in the Centre for Islamic Art and Thought (*Howzeh andisheh va honar-e Islami*) and the Art Centre of the Islamic Development (Propaganda) Organisation (*Howzeh honari sazman-e tablighat-e Islami*). In 1981 he began his cinematic career by acting in Manouchehr Haqani's *Justification* (*Towjih,* 1981) and by 1989 he had acted in nine films, including three by Mohsen Makhmalbaf: *Two Blind Eyes* (*Do cheshm-e bisu,* 1984), *Fleeing from Evil to God* (*Este'azeh*, 1984) and Boycott (*Baycot,* 1986). He made his own first feature film, *Baduk,* in 1992. This was followed by *Father* (*Pedar*, 1996), *Children of Heaven* (*Bacheha-ye aseman*, 1997),

The Colour of Paradise (*Rang-e Khoda*, 1999), *The Willow Tree* (*Bid-e majnoon*, 2005), and *The Song of Sparrows* (*Avaz-e gonjeshkha*, 2008).

As mentioned earlier, many of Majidi's films are depictions of man's spiritual attainment. In these films, Majidi depicts the abstract Sufi stations (*maqam*) and states (*ahwal*) through the characters of his films. He employs the modern medium of cinema to concretise mystical concepts. The poetic language of his films could be read as continuing in the long line of symbolic Persian literature and poetry, in which mystics, Sufis and Muslim philosophers have written much about love, God and self-annihilation. As discussed in Chapter 3, there are interesting parallels between poetry and mysticism (Knysh, 2000). The open-endedness of poetic language allows readers to create meaning, even if the poem was written in distant times. Indeed the inherent characteristics of poetry make it the natural choice for the expression of mystical experiences. Majidi himself highlights the significance of Persian literature and the relevance of Iranian cultural history to contemporary Iranians:

> Iran is an old country with a significant cultural history. Our literature is very rich with poets such as Hafiz, Saadi, Rumi. In their writings, these poets have always given a [sic] great importance to the human being. Contemporary cultural subjects are stemming from this tradition as well as the rituals associated with them. The manner [in which] these subjects are dealt with is influenced by the particular beliefs of the Iranians that existed and continue to exist nowadays. These days, the world, and in particular the Western world, is in a period of disruption with the past. Human being[s] and traditional moral values, dear to people, seem to have been lost in the process. (May 2003, http://www.cinemajidi.com/).

Thus, his filmic discourses, though modern in form, are deeply rooted in medieval Iranian mystical discourse, and particularly its poetry. They are also a reminder that Shi'i Iranian religious expressions are not solely limited to sacred texts, but also

draw from Persian mystical literature. In this chapter I will examine Majidi's *The Colour of Paradise, Baran* and *The Willow Tree*, each of which are filmic discourses that reflect some of the key mystical teachings in Islam. To this end, I will explore the Sufi theme of pain and suffering in *The Colour of Paradise* and *The Willow Tree*. In the section that follows, I will look specifically at *Baran*, drawing out its depiction of the various stages of the Sufi state of 'love' that culminates in self-annihilation. I will analyse how Majidi's films poetically engage with the Sufi stations and states as ways of spiritual attainment.

Pain and Suffering

Suffering is one of the main topics in Majidi's films. His lead characters, who are mostly children, are afflicted either by poverty, disability or both. His debut feature *Baduk* (1992), concerns the slavery of two lonely, impoverished and orphaned young siblings. The film depicts the struggles of these two children against kidnappers and drug-traffickers, who rob them of their freedom, childhood, and finally each other. In Majidi's later films, the bad-guy figures blur. Instead of having the good protagonist against the evil antagonist, his heroes are ordinary people who fight the challenges of life in extraordinary ways.

In 1998, his *Children of Heaven* (1997) was the first Iranian film to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. *Children of Heaven* is also about a brother and sister living in poverty, but this time the siblings live with a loving and caring family in the urban setting of Tehran. These two children, 'Ali and Zahra, fight their poverty with remarkable courage and maturity. The film looks at

this daily struggle, which turns into 'Ali's quest with constant searching and running throughout the film. Initially, 'Ali runs to find his sister's shoes. The film then proceeds with both of them running to share 'Ali's only pair of worn-out shoes to school. The chase then concludes with 'Ali's attempt to win third prize in the running competition—a pair of trainers—for his sister. Through the film's simple narrative, Majidi relates the greatness and strength of human spirit, determination, humility and sacrifice that manifests itself through the acts of these small children. In his later films, Majidi explores the themes of pain and suffering further: the lead characters in both *The Colour of Paradise* and *The Willow Tree* deal with physical disability and through them, the films demonstrate man's suffering in a mystical and Sufi context.

The Colour of Paradise

The Colour of Paradise (1999) is about the struggles of Mohammad Reza, a blind eleven-year-old, deprived of paternal love. Having lost his mother when he was six, he lives far away from his village, at a boarding school for the visually impaired in Tehran. When the school closes for the summer holidays his father, Hashem, reluctantly takes him back to the village. There, his two young sisters and paternal grandmother shower him with much love and affection. His father, however, appears to be ashamed of him and considers him to be the major obstacle to his remarriage to the young woman he desires, and is therefore desperate to get rid of him.

The Colour of Paradise depicts Mohammad Reza's acute sense of awareness of the world around him and its beauties and contrasts it with his father's obliviousness and

'blindness' to the same. The film, therefore, is as much about the inner blindness and struggles of the father as the struggles of his son. Mohammad Reza's greatest challenge, however, is not overcoming his handicap, but securing the love of a father who cannot come to terms with his son's disability or, in fact, the miseries of his life. Thus, the colourful surroundings of Mohammad Reza as opposed to the dull, grey setting of the father's workplace also indicate the contrastingly different worlds in which they live.

Mohammad Reza's blindness has not cut him off from the world. Instead, through touch and hearing he has developed a remarkably keen sensitivity. More importantly, he has the ability to temporarily detach himself from worldly affairs, and to listen to and contemplate nature and his surroundings. Throughout the film, Mohammad Reza hears the sounds of birds and nature when everyone else around him seems to be unconscious of them. He can sense the trouble of a chick fallen from its nest by its chirping. When his father negotiates the price of the small carpet he wants to sell to the merchant, Mohammad Reza easily blocks off the men's voices and the classical music playing in the store to listen to the pigeons and doves singing above. Once back in his village, he listens to the woodpeckers in the forest and tries to decipher the notes of their chirping. At school, he listens to granny's voice on the recorded tape and connects with her through the recording. He hears what most people around him fail to hear.

In many classical Sufi texts the sense of hearing precedes the sense of seeing.[28] The Prophet Muhammad, for example, received the Revelation through hearing. When asked about the experience he likened it to the sounds of the caravan bells. Bukhari documents the following hadith from Ayesha, the Prophet's wife:

> Al-Harith bin Hisham asked Allah's Apostle "O Allah's Apostle! How is the Divine Inspiration revealed to you?" Allah's Apostle replied, "Sometimes it is (revealed) like the ringing of a bell, this form of Inspiration is the hardest of all and then this state passes off after I have grasped what is inspired. Sometimes the Angel comes in the form of a man and talks to me and I grasp whatever he says." 'Aisha added: Verily I saw the Prophet being inspired Divinely on a very cold day and noticed the sweat dropping from his forehead (as the Inspiration was over). (Bukhari, 2007-2008).

Mohammad Reza and his father have both suffered in various ways. However, each of them deals with their afflictions in a different manner, which also informs their different approaches to life. The implied shortsightedness of the father has allowed him to focus only on his miseries, turning him into an embittered soul. He is afraid that Mohammad Reza's blindness might hinder his own marriage prospects and his only chance of attaining happiness. Thus, his initial reluctance to let Mohammad Reza appear publicly in the village, and later his eagerness to get rid of him, are not really out of shame for his son's disability. In fact, he does not express the same concerns outside the village setting, when Mohammad Reza is present at his workplace with his co-workers or when they are travelling in Tehran. Mohammad

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[28] For example, Knysh (2009) explains how the Sufi exegete, Samnani, spoke of the four hierarchical levels of human understanding of the Qur'an. These understandings in the ascending order are through hearing, divine inspiration, righteous acts and direct witness. The very fact that the Qur'an itself was and remains an aural experience amongst Muslims is also of significant importance. In fact Graham (2009) provides a recent example of the modern Iranian scholar, Muhammad Taqi Shari'ati-Mazinani: 'The Qur'an was a light that extended through the opening of the ears into the soul; it transformed this soul and as a consequence of that, the world'.

Reza, however, is capable of surviving the society in which he lives despite its occasional hostility. Even though initially teased by the village children, Mohammad Reza succeeds in amazing and impressing them when he attends the village school and reads out the school text fluently in Braille. Other than with his father, he enjoys a very close and loving relationship with his family. He participates in village life with his grandmother and two sisters who are only too happy to have him around.

Hashem, however, seems incapable of seeing all the love and beauty that already exists in his own life. Whilst all other members of his family bring great joy and happiness to one other, the father has totally deprived himself of it, choosing only to see his loss. His outburst at the grandmother when she leaves home because he had taken Mohammad Reza away is very telling:

> You want me to get stuck with taking care of a blind child? Why does that God of yours, who is Great, not help me out of this misery? What should I be grateful to Him for? For things that I do not have? For my miseries? For a blind child? For a lost wife? I lost my father when I was young. Who cared for me? Who loved me?

This complaint against God is also voiced by Mohammad Reza. When he is tricked by his father and is left with the blind carpenter in a place far away from the village, the distraught boy opens up his heart to the carpenter:

> Nobody loves me, not even granny, because I'm blind. Everyone wants to run away from me. All other village children go to the village school except for me, who has to go to the special school for blind people at the other end of the world... our teacher says that God loves blind people more, but I said if He did so, He wouldn't make us blind so that we couldn't see Him. He said God is not visible, He is everywhere, you can see Him everywhere, you can see Him through your fingertips. Now I look for Him everywhere, so that one day my hands might touch Him and I can tell Him everything - even all the secrets in my heart.

Human suffering is one of the important themes discussed in Sufi literature. As an aspect of human life, various people respond to suffering differently. In Sufism, suffering is welcomed as a process through which the human soul is purified; it is the precursor to a greater joy. Rumi's famous poem about the chickpeas cooking in the pot of boiling water is a metaphor for the suffering of the human soul that matures through the process. The uncooked chickpeas keep jumping up in the pot trying to evade the fire, but the woman keeps pushing them back down in with her ladle. They ask her why did she keep torturing them, since she had already shown her appreciation by buying them. She responds:

> I do not cook you because I dislike you: I want you to gain taste and savor.
> You will become food and then mix with the spirit. You do not suffer tribulation because you are despicable (Mathnavi, III 4163-4164, translated in Chittick, 1983: 80).

Even though Mohammad Reza also complains about God and not being loved, his approach to his suffering differs greatly from that of his father. Mohammad Reza searches for God everywhere, to talk to Him and share his secrets with Him. A man does not become fortunate or unfortunate because he is spared or burdened with suffering; rather it is his response to suffering that makes him fortunate or unfortunate and shows his worth.

> God makes an unfortunate man suffer and he flees from Him in ingratitude,
> But when He sends suffering to a fortunate man, he moves closer to Him. (M IV 2915-2916 translated in Chittick, 1983: 115).

The father, by contrast, gets further and further away from God and can only see what he has lost. The greatest torture, however, is to be far from God.

> The cruelty of Time and of every suffering that exists is easier than distance from God and heedlessness.

> For that cruelty will pass, but distance from Him will not. No one possesses good fortune but he who takes to Him an aware spirit (M VI 1756-57, translated in Chittick, 1983: 58).

Analysing Rumi's body of literature, Chittick maintains that in the tribulations that man faces, his attachment to self results in suffering. These afflictions however are 'all Mercy hidden in the guise of Wrath'. They provide man with the opportunity to separate himself from the self and get closer to God. 'The fundamental problem of most men is that they do not realize that every hardship and pain they undergo is only a shadow of their separation from God' (Chittick, 1983: 237). These sufferings provide man with the necessary rituals of purification through which he is liberated from his self and the world. Trying to avoid suffering is in fact an attempt to flee God. One 'must not flee pain and heartache—which come to him from God—but his own self. The only way to flee from suffering is to seek refuge from one's own ego with God' (Chittick, 1983: 238).

Hashem can no longer appreciate what he does have, but rather allows things that he does not have to overshadow his life. Eventually he starts to lose all that he did have but refused to see. As Rumi says, 'No one has ever fled from suffering without finding something worse in return' (Rumi, D 123, translated in Chittick, 1983: 297). Indeed, the Grandmother dies more from grief than from her illness, and Hashem's fiancée's family breaks off the engagement, considering the marriage inauspicious. The sudden burden of these new afflictions awakens Hashem. He goes back to the carpenter and after much hesitation finally asks to take Mohammad Reza back home. On their way, Mohammad Reza falls into the river while crossing the bridge. Hashem pauses for a long time—as though momentarily welcoming the situation

that would rid him of this unwanted encumbrance—before plunging into the river to save his son. This delayed reaction, however, means that the strong river currents have swiftly taken Mohammad Reza out of reach.

When Hashem regains consciousness and finds Mohammad Reza washed up on the seashore, it is the first time that we see him hold his son. This last scene of Mohammad Reza and Hashem is similar to one of the most famous epic tableaus of Rostam and Sohrab, immortalized in the *Shahnameh*. As in the Persian tragedy of Rostam and Sohrab, the father's attempt to make reparations is too late. Rostam, not knowing that his opponent Sohrab is his own son, strikes the fatal wound, only to immediately realise the truth. His desperate attempts to save his son and the remedy with which he returns to heal his wound are all too late. Sohrab dies just before his father brings the remedy. Thus, the famous Persian proverb of 'the remedy after Sohrab's death' (*noosh daroo ba'd-e marg-e Sohrab*), which refers to a belated and futile attempt to make amends, can be read in Hashem's belated expression of love for his son. Indeed, even though Hashem throws himself into the water and endangers his own life to save that of his son, this act of selflessness comes to naught. Mohammad Reza's illuminated hand, even though understood by many reviewers as a happy ending, is read more plausibly as union with the Divine when he finally touches/sees God.

In fact, most of Majidi's films do not have a happy ending in the conventional style of the protagonist achieving his desires. Rather, in most cases the 'vague' endings could be read as the higher spiritual attainment of the protagonist. Thus, even though 'Ali does not win the trainers in *Children of Heaven*, and Mohammad Reza does not

gain his father's love and acceptance, their experiences transform them in the path to a higher level of being in the ascending stages of human perfection.

The Willow Tree

Majidi's *Willow Tree* (2005)[29] also has a blind protagonist, this time Yusef, a middle-aged professor of literature and mysticism in Tehran. The lead character is married and enjoys the love and support of his family, particularly that of his wife, Roya. Their calm and happy life is threatened when he is diagnosed with a tumour. Yusuf travels to France for an operation and in a twist of fate learns not only that the tumour is benign, but also that he is regaining his eyesight after almost 38 years. He returns to Tehran, but this new experience changes everything in his life.

Some Western reviews of *The Willow Tree* have read the film as a philosophical journey of existentialism (Boutilier, 2005), to which Majidi responds:

> We were very aware of Existentialism when we wrote it. It was core for what the film is about. But also, because the philosophy of Iran is linked to the Metaphysical and Spirituality the film has two sides (interview with Boutilier, 2005).

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[29] On his official website Majidi (2005b) narrates how he came across someone a few years ago who had lost and then regained his sight, and that this encounter was the inspiration for *The Willow Tree.* Some Iranian media have reported that Majidi met this man when he was researching *The Colour of Paradise*, but abused his trust and his story. The man, Yaqub Abdipoor from Tehran, was blinded in an explosion when he was six and later regained his sight. However, Abdipoor claims that the film has no similarity to his life and states that he regrets having shared his story with Majidi. The media have also criticised Majidi for not crediting Abdipoor in the film. (see for example, http://www.aftab.ir/news/2005/sep/21/c5c1127318899_art_culture_cinema_majid_majidi.php, visited 12 June 2007). The film's departure from the real story might in fact explain Majidi's decision to remove the credits to Abdipoor.

The Willow Tree makes intertextual references to *The Colour of Paradise*. In a way, Mohammad Reza's unanswered question about God's love in *The Colour of Paradise* is addressed in *The Willow Tree*. Before his trip to France, Yusef writes a letter to God, pleading with Him to show mercy and to cure his tumour. He reminds God how he had not complained about suffering from the darkness of sight and says:

> I want to say a few words to you, or have you forgotten me? The one whom You deprived of Your beauties and he didn't complain. Instead of light and brightness I sank in darkness and did not complain. I was content with this little paradise of mine and was enjoying it. Were all these years of suffering and difficulty not enough that You want to add to my suffering? I do not know whether or not I will ever make it back to my family. I do not know whether or not this illness will put me down. I do not know who to take my complaint against You. But I beseech You to show me some of Your kindness. Do not take away the opportunity of this life from me.

After the operation he is blessed with more than he asks for. Not only is his life spared, but there is also a possibility of regaining his sight. Once again he implores God for yet another opportunity:

> I know I made a mistake, and my first mistake was that I did not know you well enough. Now I know that you haven't erased my name from your book of kindness, that you haven't forgotten me, that you are with me and looking after me. But I so wish that you would complete your kindness. Now that you've been there for me and brought me halfway, I beg of you to finish it well. Trust me! I appreciate light more than others. If I come out of darkness, I will be with you until the end.

One more time Yusef's prayers are answered. However, he fails his test miserably and God's 'act of kindness', therefore, turns out to become his suffering. His heart begins to desire what his eyes see, and his enlightened heart quickly sinks into darkness. He begins to lose his love and respect for things that he had held sacred before his trip. At the beginning of the film Yusef compares his wife Roya to the heavenly angels. Her unconditional love for him is compared to Rumi's

unquestioning love for Shams. After regaining his sight, however, he lusts after a much younger and more beautiful woman and loses all his appreciation for his family and the happy and respectful life that he had enjoyed so far.

The world and all its distractions overwhelm Yusef. He allows his hungry eyes to dictate his life and the course they take. As he tells his mother in an outburst, he no longer needs anyone. He spends many long hours exploring the city and its gleaming consumerism. The glitter eventually overpowers his divine spark, turning him into a lost soul. He disregards his years of research and study on philosophy and mysticism as a pile of rubbish and resigns his occupation as a respected professor. Roya, his wife, can no longer take his unkind behaviour towards her. She leaves him, taking their daughter with her. Yusuf's mother falls critically ill with worry about her son's transformation and is hospitalised. And the home, which he had once imagined as a little paradise, now makes him sick. The image of his house, covered with the ashes of books and pictures that he burns in his garden towards the end of the film, is reminiscent of a hell that he has created with his own hands. Most importantly, he loses his closeness to God, and his 'fortunate' recovery results in great loneliness.

The film compares sufferings that are beyond man's control and, therefore, attributed to God, with self-inflicted afflictions, such as those that Yusef experiences after he regains his sight. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the real suffering in the Sufi context is attachment to self and the further the distance between man and God, the more his suffering. Yusef's blessed eyesight increases his separation from God and his obedience to his ego. His heart, which had once been home to the love of God, is

instead filled with the emptiness and desires of the outside world. Only when God withdraws his mercy, and Yusef begins to once again lose his eyesight, does he return to God, talking to him, repenting and pleading for one more opportunity in life. As Rumi states, 'separation is to suffer His absence, majesty and severity (*qahr*). But mercy prevails over wrath, so every cruelty (*jafa'*) of the Beloved is in fact an act of faithfulness (*wafa'*). In showing their sincerity, God's lovers welcome the pain (*dard*) of the dregs (*durd*) along with the joy of the wine' (Lewisohn, 2007).

Mohammad Reza's puzzle in *The Colour of Paradise* – that 'if God loved us, he wouldn't make us blind' – is addressed in *The Willow Tree*. It turns out that Yusef's blindness was a blessing in the disguise of suffering. As a blind man, he had been a respected professor who had dedicated his life to the study of mysticism and enjoyed the support of a loving family. God's love for him far outweighed his loss of physical sight. He enjoyed inner sight and peace as well as love and respect within both his private and social life. God's love for him however, did not stop during the period of his separation from Him. When he loses his eyesight for the second time and begs God for another opportunity in life, he seeks not just the recovery of his sight, but an opportunity for repentance. As mentioned earlier, repentance is the first station in the Sufi path which, Hujwiri states, is followed by other stations such as conversion, renunciation and trust in God. The film ends with Yusef effectively at the beginning of the Sufi path.

Self-Sacrifice and the Alchemy of Love

The Sufi stations and states on the mystical path culminate in self-sacrifice and love. There are abundant references to these themes in Persian literature, and particularly

in poetry. Rumi, Attar, Sa'di, Jami and Hafez's compositions are just a few examples of poetry filled with themes of love, sacrifice and self-annihilation. These poetic metaphors do not just refer to divine love. Jami's poetic rendition of the love story of Leyli and Majnun, for example, transforms human love into a vehicle and symbol of divine love (Nasr and Matini, 1991: 344). Majidi explores these concepts through the vocabulary of love in modern times. His poetic discourse in *Baran* is a beautiful depiction of the various stages of the Sufi state of 'love'.

Baran is about a young Azeri man, Latif, who works on a building site in Tehran. His relatively easy job catering and shopping for the labourers allows him to avoid the more arduous manual labour. When Najaf, an illegal Afghan labourer, falls from the second floor of the building and injures his leg, his young son, Rahmat, tries to replace his father to earn a living for the family. However, Rahmat proves too weak and incompetent. Subsequently, Memar, the construction supervisor, swaps Latif and Rahmat's jobs, forcing Latif to take on the hard labour he had so far managed to avoid.

Latif is furious at this new arrangement and takes all his anger out on Rahmat, who never utters a word. He grudgingly shows Rahmat the ropes and introduces him to the shop from which he used to buy groceries for the workers. The shopkeeper keeps Latif's birth certificate to guarantee the goods sold to him on credit. Latif takes the opportunity of being away from the site to slap Rahmat hard on the face on their way to the shop. Rahmat's only response is to pick up a stone and aim it at Latif but not throw it at him. To Latif's great disappointment, Rahmat's tea and lunch spreads are very soon welcomed enthusiastically by the men, and he is the only one who dines

alone. In a fit, Latif goes to the tiny pantry where Rahmat is based and smashes everything, creating a huge mess. Rahmat, as usual, does not utter a word; a position he maintains consistently throughout the movie. Instead, Latif's outrage allows him to clean up and rearrange the room from inside out, turning it into his own space. Latif, increasingly consumed by hatred for Rahmat and not satiated with these acts of revenge, waits one early morning on the rooftop in ambush for Rahmat and Soltan (an old Afghan worker, who introduced Rahmat) and throws wet stucco at them. Later that day, when Latif is working from across the pantry, the wind blows aside the curtain at the entrance of the pantry and in the dim reflection of the mirror, he sees the image of a girl combing her long hair and tying it up. He creeps up behind the curtain to get a closer look and only then realises that Rahmat is, in fact, a girl disguised as a boy.

Latif is overwhelmed and bewildered when faced with the truth of Rahmat's identity. The unveiling of truth, and in this case, the two layers of unveiling—of the curtain lifted at the pantry entrance because of the wind and Rahmat's unveiling of her headcover—enables him to see the beauty hidden from him. His subsequent attempts to make amends do not simply arise from the shame and pain he feels for his previous selfish behaviour. Rather, he falls in love with Baran, which is Rahmat's real name. His blind and selfish acts were, therefore, a result of his ignorance, through which he failed to appreciate real beauty and truth. As Hujwiri states, 'All veils come from ignorance; when ignorance has passed away, the veils vanish and this life, by means of gnosis becomes one with the life to come' (Hujwiri, quoted in Smith, 1995: 210). Once having entered the path, the Sufi undergoes a process of inward transformation. Similarly, this revelatory incident becomes the beginning of

Latif's inward transformation. The following day, we see Latif breaking a wall in the construction site and making holes into it, like two eyes that let in light, a symbolic reference to Latif's newly acquired ability to see. As Smith argues, gnosis,

> means the Vision, for when the eye of the soul is stripped of all the veils which hindered it from seeing God, then it beholds the reality of the Divine attributes by its own inner light, which goes far beyond the light which is given to perfect faith, for gnosis, as we have seen, belongs to a sphere quite other than of faith (Smith, 1995: 211).

The film follows Latif's inner journey, with various stages analogous to the Sufi states discussed above. At the beginning of the film Latif gave the impression of boyish insouciance and hot-temperedness; now he turns into a considerate man who channels all his anger into protecting Baran. When a worker throws back at her the cigarette she has bought for him, demanding a different brand, Latif jumps in and has a fight with him. When another worker walks into the pantry demanding tea outside break-time, Latif's blood boils and forces the man to leave the pantry. When the government inspectors, alerted about Memar's employment of illegal Afghan workers, chase Baran in the street, Latif gets involved and takes the beating to give Baran enough time to escape. Interestingly this appears to happen on the very same street on which he had slapped her earlier. Latif is arrested and later bailed out of jail by Memar.

Discussing Rumi's philosophy of 'attainment' to God, Chittick argues that once the disciple has entered the Way, this third dimension of spiritual realisation is not a simple, one-step process. 'It can be said that this third dimension of Sufi teaching deals with all the inner experiences undergone by the traveler on his journey' (1983: 11). In this way, 'once having actualized wakefulness, the traveler moves on to

repentance and then to self-examination; or once having achieved humility, he ascends to chivalry and then to expansion' (Chittick, 1983: 12). Latif's acts clearly demonstrate these various stages of his inner journey, including wakefulness, repentance, humility and chivalry. Thus, when Latif takes the beating and imprisonment for Baran's sake, he takes the first steps in Rumi's terms, in chivalry and expansion.

However, these acts of redemption and sacrifice only prove to be the beginning of his long ordeal in loving Baran. Even though he is awakened from his ignorance and succeeds in overcoming many of his selfish desires, the greatest test still remains—the ability to overcome his ego. In Sufism, the ego is the final and most opaque veil that stands between man and his Beloved. '[The] Veil between man and God is not heaven and earth, but your assumptions and ego are your veil. Remove that from the way and you shall reach God' (Abul-Khayr, *Asrar al-Tawhid* p. 229 quoted in Nurbaksh, 1982-1988: 8). This annihilation of self is also an essential aspect of Rumi's philosophy. He asserts that it is only through the annihilation of selfhood that one can attain 'his true self, which is existence and "subsistence" within God' (Chittick, 1983: 179).

After Baran's near arrest, Memar can no longer risk employing Afghans. Baran, along with all the other Afghan workers, is dismissed. This becomes the beginning of Latif's restlessness in his separation from his beloved. Not knowing where to find her and unable to share his pain with anyone, he distances himself further and further from the world around him. The only trace of her left behind is a hairpin with a few strands of her hair caught in it, which he finds on the rooftop where she used to feed

the pigeons. He treasures the hairpin like dear life and carries it with him everywhere. Again, this echoes a verse from Attar:

> From her tresses, if I were to get a tip of her hair
> I would treasure it like my eyes and attend to it like my life (quoted in Nurbakhsh, 1982: 64)

Latif begins searching for her in the secluded area outside the city where many Afghan families dwell. Despite being very close to her, he fails to see her even though she sees him. During his search he finds Soltan, the Afghan friend who had brought Baran to the construction site. He finds out from him that Rahmat works as a 'rock collector', removing heavy rocks from the river. After witnessing the extreme conditions under which Baran works, Latif becomes even more restless. He is desperate to save Baran from the arduous conditions in which she lives. After much pleading with Memar, he collects his pending salary for a year from Memar and takes it to Soltan. He asks Soltan to give the money to Najaf, Baran's father, without mentioning its source. Najaf, however, decides to gift the money back to Soltan so that he can return to Afghanistan and the family awaiting him.

Latif is devastated when he finds this out, not because he has lost all his earnings but because he seems unable to make a difference to Baran's difficult life. His acts of self-annihilation and non-existence are evident through this generous and selfless giving of all his material wealth for Baran. Latif takes the note that Soltan had left for him pledging to pay him back as soon as possible, and casts it into a stream. He had never considered the money's return and willingly accepted poverty for his love. The concept of poverty and giving away of one's material wealth is repeatedly employed in many Sufi teachings. As Chittick states:

> Rumi often employs the term 'poverty' in a context showing that it is synonymous with 'annihilation' and 'non-existence', the dervish is he who is 'poor' because he has nothing of 'his own'. He is totally empty of selfhood. The true 'poor man' is in truth the richest of all men, since not existing himself, he subsists through the Self. This then is the significance of the Prophet's saying, 'Poverty is my pride' (Chittick, 1983: 187).

In Sufi teachings, love leads to man's annihilation, which is a necessary step in union with God. 'As long as man continues to live under the illusion of the real existence of his own ego, his own selfhood, he is far from God. Only through negation of himself can he attain to union with Him' (Chittick, 1983: 232). Latif's self annihilation culminates in doing away with his identity. With no money left except for a few notes of his pocket cash, he buys wooden crutches for Najaf and leaves them by their house door. He overhears Najaf sobbing for the death of his brother, killed in the war in Afghanistan, and his desire to return to help his brother's family.

When Memar refuses Najaf's request for a loan, Latif takes matters into his own hands. With nothing left, Latif sells his national Identity Card—the most important document an Iranian needs to hold to be recognised as a legal entity by the state—to the black-market traffickers. With this act, therefore, he gives up the last trace of his identity, a metaphor that can be read as a complete annihilation of the self. On true love, Smith quotes the tenth century al-Qurashi:

> 'True Love,' said Abu Abdallah al-Qurashi (*ob.* A.D. 941), 'means to give all that thou hast to Him Whom thou lovest, so that nothing remains to thee of thine own'. And this meant not only the sacrifice of personal possessions, which might be a cause of separation between the lover and his Beloved, and the giving up of the personal will, but a complete self-surrender. Only the lover who is emptied of self can hope to be the dwelling-place of the Divine (Smith, 1995: 207).

Latif hands over to Najaf the money he receives from selling his identity, and pretends it was sent by Memar. Najaf is overjoyed and plans to leave for Afghanistan the following day. In effect, he uses this last belonging of Latif to separate him forever from his beloved. Latif runs aimlessly around the town and ends up at the local shrine. He leaves his cap, with Baran's hairpin on it by the pond and is drawn inside the shrine. It is as though the divine has called for him. As mentioned earlier, unlike the Sufi stations, which require man's concerted efforts, the Sufi states are 'usually said to consist of spiritual graces bestowed directly by God and outside of man's power of acquisition' (Chittick, 1983: 12). Latif's acts of selflessness thus far can be read as ascending the hierarchical Sufi stations. His experience in the shrine, however, tells of the grace of having entered the Sufi state, reflected in the contentment in his face as he sees his beloved off the next day. He kneels in front of her to help her pick up the vegetables she has dropped on the ground just before she is to leave. And it is at this moment that he finally, even if briefly, succeeds in fully gazing upon the face of his beloved. As Smith argues, pure love guides the mystic from one station to another

> until he comes to the end of the first stage of the Way, when the mirror of the soul has become as pure from self as flame from smoke, and is fitted to reflect the Light of God, by which it is illuminated in the second stage, that of ecstasy; and now the mystic enters upon that third stage of attainment, which is indeed the end of his journey. There he receives that mystic knowledge of the Divine, the gnosis (*ma'rifa*), which will enable him to see God face to face, and in seeing Him, to become one with Him (Smith, 1995: 209).

Through this film Majidi demonstrates Latif's inner journey and maturity from nonchalant boy to selfless lover. According to Rumi, 'because Love pertains to the experiential dimension of Sufism, not the theoretical, it must be experienced to be

understood. It cannot be explained in words, any more than the true nature of one's attachment to a beloved of this world can be set down on paper' (Chittick, 1983: 194). Similarly, Majidi's narrative provides us with a glimpse of this transformative experience, and allows us to see that which cannot be articulated through the narrow confines of words.

Conclusions

Sufism's early appearance within Islamic history, the vast amount of literature it has produced over the centuries as well as its significant influence on Muslim culture and society, makes it an undeniably significant approach within Islam. Persian literature, and particularly its poetry, played a significant role in the expression of Sufi ideas. Numerous works explore the Sufi states and stations, and the mastery with which many of them have been composed has rendered their authors immortal. As diverse as these approaches can be, man's spiritual attainment and his proximity to God remain at the core of any Sufi teaching. One can write volumes on Sufism, but this chapter focused selectively on those arguments that have been expressed in the works of Majidi in order to show their filmic expressions.

Majidi's films are a reflection of Iranian-Shi'i religious expressions, which are not limited to the sacred texts, but also draw from the works of great mystical masters. Majidi demonstrates how the Shi'i and particularly Iranian Shi'i expression of religion is deeply rooted not only in its sacred texts but also in the artistic and cultural expression of the people. With their poetic language, Majidi's works are filmic discourses on man's journey to spiritual attainment and his proximity to God.

The four Sufi postulates in Chapter 3 – intuition, inward light, going beyond self and love – are all explored in Majidi's three films discussed above. In *The Colour of Paradise*, Mohammad Reza's intuition and inward light is contrasted with his father's inward blindness and lack of intuition. They live in different worlds even as they share the same time and space. This leads to the very different ways in which each of them approaches pain and suffering. In *The Willow Tree,* Yusef's intuition and inward light during the long period of his blindness had allowed him to live in a paradise of peace and happiness, a state which he rapidly loses after the gleam of the outside world blinds his inward light. *Baran* is a filmic discourse on the various Sufi stations and states in which love becomes the guide to the soul's journey and its ascent to God. *Baran*'s narrative relates the various Sufi stages: drawing the curtains of ignorance and stripping off the veils of selfishness and sensuality to see the Divine Vision. In all these films, spiritual attainment requires no special rank or distinction, or indeed, any understanding and study of the sources, and includes the ordinary man. In fact, none of the characters, except for Yusef, are formally educated in mystical knowledge. Most of Majidi's protagonists undergoing these spiritual journeys are either children or barely-educated adults from an impoverished social class.

Majidi's works bring these age-old mystical notions to the silver screen and apply them to the modern-day lives of ordinary people. Just as Rumi, Attar, Sa'di and Jami's works are not a mere collection of stories and poetry but imbued and embedded with Sufi teachings and meanings, Majidi's films are similarly not just simple stories of destitute or disabled people. Instead, they are layered with Sufi concepts that allow his viewers to share the spiritual experiences of his characters.

He reifies these abstract concepts through the medium of film and draws their relevance to today's modern world much as they were at the time of their articulation many centuries ago. The modern-day focus on the Muslim interpretation of self-annihilation is often understood in terms of violent acts of terror and destruction such as suicide attacks. In the Sufi context of Islam, sacrificing oneself, however, was not defined as dogmatic reactions seeking to wreak havoc on lives and livelihoods at the touch of a button. It is, in fact, a long and challenging process of sacrificing one's desires for the betterment of another, of practising patience, forgiveness and love. What Majidi succeeds in doing is to produce a modern discourse which is rooted in the medieval Iranian mystical discourse of Islam and acts as a reminder of Sufi notions. Like the stories of Leyli and Majnun, the Simurgh and the *Mathnavi*, Majidi also narrates stories, but through the medium of film and with contemporary and ordinary Iranians as his heroes.

Having explored formalistic approaches to religion through film in the previous chapter, and mystical and personal approaches in this chapter, in the next chapter I examine the works of another filmmaker whose films, I argue, are philosophical texts that, among other things, deliberate upon the question of religion, including both formalistic and Sufi approaches.

Chapter 7: Thinking Films: Kiarostami, a Poetic Philosopher

I presented a paper at the three-day conference entitled *Abbas Kiarostami: Image, Voice and Vision* at the Victoria & Albert Museum, part of a London-wide series of events held in 2005 in Kiarostami's honour, as mentioned in Chapter 2. Having made an ethno-documentary film on Iranian asylum seekers in Turkey in 2002, I was keen also to attend the nine-day intensive film workshop at the French Institute that was part of this series of events. To my dismay, my application to the workshop was declined. At the end of the conference, all the speakers were invited to an Italian dinner with Kiarostami. He was seated at the far end of the long table from where I was sitting, and I did not get a chance to speak with him. Later, one of the organisers called me and said that Kiarostami was intrigued to hear that I had presented a paper on his films and religion, and that he would like to meet me.

My subsequent conversation with Kiarostami proved to be highly engaging. He was genuinely surprised to hear that someone was looking at religion in his films. As far as he was concerned, his films were not at all religious and he did not know if he would even label himself religious. I explained that I was not looking at his films as religious works, but rather that I was exploring his approach and references to religion. He found this very interesting and said that as far as he knew, no one else had looked at this aspect of his films. After this long and fruitful conversation, Kiarostami said that we would need more time to talk about his films and that it would be good if I could attend the workshop at the French Institute. I told him that I had already applied and been rejected. He advised me to just turn up on the day and say that I had an invitation from Kiarostami. And sure enough, I was admitted!

Most of the students came from a filmmaking background, and very soon word was out that I, along with a couple of other invited students, were not part of the main pool. Kiarostami, however, treated us equally and expected the same from all of us, so much so that it was difficult to differentiate between the 'proper' students and the 'gate-crashers' whilst doing the work. During these nine days, Kiarostami discussed his methods of filmmaking, such as the use of non-actors, the advantages and challenges of these methods and the general difficulties of producing and distributing films. He also shared the experiences of his other students in previous workshops in Italy and Brazil. We were then asked to make a short film on digital video on the topic of lifts, using the techniques he had introduced to us. By the end of it I had a one-and-a-half minute short film and acted in two other shorts, all of which were screened at the Ciné Lumière on the last day. But more excitingly, these nine days gave me an opportunity to learn directly from him. The workshop proved to be a highly educational insight into his work and his approach. Before this, I had known Kiarostami only through his films, his poetry and his photographs. The workshop was a great opportunity to deepen my understanding of his work.

Kiarostami's films are often studied for their humanistic, universal and sometimes spiritual and other idiosyncratic references (Saeed-vafa and Rosenbaum: 2003, Andrews, 2005), but they are seldom known for their treatment of religion. In my interviews with Iranian filmmakers, critics and authorities of the industry in Iran on the topic of religion and spirituality in cinema, many names were invoked but not once was Kiarostami mentioned in this regard. Even when I suggested his films as a possibility within this category, they were all very surprised. Most of them dismissed the idea immediately and others just responded: 'REALLY?!' They would then

move on to other topics, not really seeing the point in discussing religion in Kiarostami's films.

Kiarostami is certainly not known for his religious life or background. Moreover, if by religion and cinema we mean taking a theological approach that attempts to detect parallels between religious doctrines and the ideas conveyed in film, or depiction of the lives of saints and founders of religion, then Kiarostami's work would obviously not fall within this category of study.

One could argue that if Kiarostami himself was intrigued by my study of religion and spirituality in his films, then the surprise this proposal aroused in others was completely understandable. However, unlike the critics, Kiarostami's surprise was not because his works are far removed from religious references. It was simply that no one had previously paid any serious attention to this aspect of his films. He explained that the problem arises when religion is understood only as that which is defined by a sole authority. Faith and belief, however, go beyond these limited definitions. When asked in an interview with the *Guardian* whether or not he has religious faith, Kiarostami stated:

> I can't answer this. I think religion is very personal and the tragedy for our country is that the personal aspect has been destroyed. It would be the easiest thing in the world for me to say that I am religious, but I won't. This most personal aspect of our lives has become the tool of the government's power. The value of people is equated with their religiosity (Jeffries, 2005).

It would be an overstatement to assert that religion is the main concern of Kiarostami's films, but the premise that he avoids religious references altogether does not hold water either. Kiarostami does not shy away from referring to religion

by touching on traditional belief systems, social taboos, and more importantly showing, as Bird states, 'man's struggle to discern the divine presence' (Bird, 1982). Like some other Iranian filmmakers, such as Majidi, Kiarostami also employs the poetic style to explore man's struggle towards spiritual attainment.

Many critics read Kiarostami's works as alluding to the spiritual. However, these references are limited mainly to parallels drawn between Sufi concepts and certain imagery in the films, such as the zigzag path and the lone trees. I set out to examine the treatment of religion and spirituality in Kiarostami's works not merely by outlining correspondences between the pictures and Sufism. Rather, Kiarostami, I argue, is a poetic philosopher. His films could be read as 'poetic philosophies' that resonate with Wittgenstein's thought and the lyrical language of Iranian poets such as Sohrab Sepehry (d. 1980), Forugh Farrokhzad (d. 1967) and Omar Khayyam (d. 1123/1124). In this chapter, I will study Kiarostami's poetic celebration of life and its meaning, with a particular focus on the conflicts of life and death in his films. Kiarostami questions the religious and scientific convictions about the world and proposes an alternative approach to looking at the world. His approach to these issues makes for interesting comparisons with Wittgenstein's philosophy on the mystical.

Kiarostami, a 'Poetic Philosopher'

It is not an exaggeration to say that Abbas Kiarostami is the most internationally acclaimed Iranian filmmaker. Born in 1940 in Tehran, Kiarostami is also a poet and photographer. He studied graphic design and drawing at the University of Tehran. In

1969, he joined the Centre for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults in Tehran (*Kanun parvaresh fekri koodakan va nojavanan*), where he set up and ran the film department and made his first films. He has won many international awards including the prestigious Palme d'Or at the 1997 Cannes International Film Festival for *Taste of Cherry*. His international claim to fame began with *Where is the Friend's House?* (*Khane-ye dust kojast?*, 1987). The fact that these and all his more recent films are easily available from the main online retailers such as Amazon.com and other distributors, or media stores such as Virgin and HMV—a luxury not granted to most other Iranian filmmakers—speaks volumes about his credibility in the West. It is not just film festivals and critics that have been attracted to his works, but also academia, evident in numerous publications that discuss his films at great length. Academic publications seem to be so saturated with his works that editors of various academic journals who have otherwise shown interest in my work have inevitably hinted that there is already so much available on Kiarostami that they prefer to publish material on other filmmakers.

However, Kiarostami's popularity outside his home country has not been shared inside it. In his own context, Kiarostami is often felt to have gained undeserved recognition. As Saeed-Vafa (2002) demonstrates, some Iranians criticise his rural depictions as an effort to exoticise Iran in order to cater to international tastes and film festivals. Others argue that his films are irrelevant to the concerns of modern day Iran and overshadow the efforts of more deserving filmmakers such as Beyzaie. They argue that since the reading of these latter films requires a deep knowledge of Iranian culture and mythology, they are labelled as inaccessible and undesirable for

foreign audiences (Farahmand, 2002 and Dabashi, 2001). Kiarostami's films, therefore, impede the exposure of more deserving fellow filmmakers.

Even Kiarostami's 1997 success at Cannes received less attention in the Iranian media than his kiss on the cheek of Catherine Deneuve when receiving the Palme d'Or. Back in his homeland, this stirred great controversy among conservatives, who condemned his unIslamic gesture. Thus, instead of expecting a grand welcome and reception for having elevated his national cinema to the highest international recognition, he was forced to postpone his return until the waters settled. Some have argued that the Iranian state has been supportive of Kiarostami's international appearances because of his films' apolitical and non-critical stance. However, as he has often mentioned in his recent interviews, none of his films have actually been screened in Iran since 1996. It is only a small group of students and elites within Iran who remain attracted to his works and until recently could only watch his films through either private screenings or pirated copies, which are widely available in the country. Things seem to have improved slightly. For example, a conference on *Barresi zaban-e filmha-ye Kiarostami* (Examining the language of Kiarostami's films), held at the University of Tehran in January 2006, screened many of his films and invited him to address the students. However, despite wide rejection in his home country, his influence on many Iranian filmmakers is indisputable, a fact that even his opponents admit, and which academic publications detail.

Locating Kiarostami within the various discourses

I am aware of the criticisms that may be raised against drawing parallels between a Western philosopher's thinking and that of an Iranian filmmaker. In fact, comparisons of Kiarostami with modernists have often been opposed as an inappropriate exploration. It has been questioned whether we should 'complacently analyse the works of such a genuinely Iranian filmmaker using a concept of 'modernity' which is so markedly Western?' (Rollet, quoted in Elena, 2005: 187). There are many problems inherent in the notion of a 'genuinely Iranian filmmaker' and, consequently, with the irrelevance of modernity in this regard. To mention but a few, first it presumes that Iran, being a non-Western country, never experienced modernity, and, therefore, as Mir-Ehsan (2005) asserts, the only way of determining Kiarostami's influences and roots would be through looking at Persian miniatures and the Iranian musical tradition. However, an argument that consistently positions Kiarostami, or for that matter any other Iranian filmmaker, solely within an Iranian tradition is untenable. Secondly, this approach overlooks the obvious: the nature of the medium of cinema itself as a Western import. Thirdly, in his various interviews, Kiarostami's frequent references to Western philosophers such as Cioran, and to filmmakers like Bertolucci and Fellini, clearly indicate his familiarity and engagement with Western thought.

However, it is not only the Western/Iranian comparison that provokes dissatisfaction. As discussed above, criticisms in his own context vary from protests at his exoticisation of Iran through rural settings catering to international tastes and film festivals, to impeding the exposure of more meritorious and fellow filmmakers.

The appeal of Kiarostami's films, they argue, stems from the fact that the films are not rooted in Iranian culture, which in turn makes them easily accessible to foreign audiences. Farahmand, referring to filmmakers such as Kiarostami, argues that 'village themes and location shooting in rural landscapes not only take viewers away from urban politics, but also reinforce the exotic look of Iranian films – and increase their marketability abroad' (Farahmand, 2002: 100). A closer look at Kiarostami's films, however, clearly shows this criticism to be unfounded and rather limited. What it suggests, in effect, is that for these critics, only a particular genre or cinematic style qualify as being deeply rooted in Iranian culture and tradition. I shall demonstrate, however, that Kiarostami's aesthetic and poetic approach is indeed so rooted.

Many Iranian critics have also criticised Kiarostami's works as lacking any intellectual bearings. Shahrukh Dulku asserts that they have an 'overwhelming emphasis on the instinctual and not intellectual aspects of life' (quoted in Elena, 2005: 104). In my interview with Dulku in Tehran in January 2005, he was emphatic that the greatest weakness of Iranian filmmakers was their ignorance of both their tradition and of modernity. In his view, they are generally unfamiliar with the appropriate employment of technology and resort to superficial elements to convey meaning and content. This weakness results in films that suffer from a lack of harmony between form and content.

Maddadpur, another critic, whose views on spirituality and cinema were discussed in detail in Chapter 4, is one of the few to refer to religion in Kiarostami's films. In *Seyr va suluk-e sinamayi* (*Cinematic Spiritual Journey*, 1997), he attempts to locate

cinema's position within the discourses of religion, spirituality and technology. He denies the possibility of exploring religion or spirituality in film, and asserts that an impious soul preoccupied with this-worldly life cannot transcend to other-worldly status (1997: 56). He maintains that only the likes of the martyred Avini, who fought on the front lines in the 'Sacred Defence' during the Iran-Iraq war, are capable of depicting spirituality through film. The present avant-garde Iranian cinema, he states, has replaced the tough-guyism and eroticism of pre-revolutionary cinema with semi-religious mysticism, lacking the slightest trace of a spiritual journey. Kiarostami, he says, is the greatest teacher and most disjunctive-minded of Iranian post-modern filmmakers. He states that Kiarostami sometimes takes on the role of the open-minded theologian (1997: 143). As though this were a final and self-explanatory decree, Maddadpur fails to analyse any of Kiarostami's films and moves on to criticise other filmmakers without any further elaboration of his assertions.

Kiarostami's films, however, are neither a demonstration of cinema techniques, as Dulku might put it, nor are they a means to engage in theology, contrary to Maddadpur's belief. The problem with an approach such as Maddadpur's lies in considering films as sermons and filmmakers as priests. It is the expectation that, like theologians, filmmakers, too, explore the nature of God and seek the truth.

Kiarostami does, nevertheless, employ cinema's unique characteristics to make philosophical films. He is a 'poetic philosopher', a term already applied to him by Rapfogel (2001). However, other than the extract below, I have thus far found nothing by Rapfogel elaborating on this terminology in general or in reference to

Kiarostami in particular. In comparing Kiarostami's and Jafar Panahi's films, Rapfogel employs the term 'poetic philosopher' to describe Kiarostami:

> Kiarostami's vision is a broader, more panoramic one. It's Panahi who takes Kiarostami's methods and innovations and directs them towards more specific, socially topical subjects. Panahi shares with Kiarostami a poetic sensibility, but he focuses it downwards, towards the street and the problems he finds there, rather than upwards and outwards—he's a poetic journalist to Kiarostami's poetic philosopher. The difference is clear from the titles of their films: *And Life Goes On* (1991) (more accurately translated as *Life and Nothing More*), *Taste of Cherry* (1997), *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999)—these are philosophical titles for philosophical films. There's nothing pretentious or facile about them—there's conviction and true wisdom at their heart, and they're always rooted in particulars. But Kiarostami's films are unmistakably the fruit of contemplation, of abstract meditation, whereas Panahi's films spring more directly from observation (Rapfogel, 2001).

Rapfogel does not discuss further the philosophy in Kiarostami's work. Here, I aim to demonstrate how some of his films are philosophical and how they resonate with Wittgenstein's thought. The films' lyrical language is influenced by Iranian poets such as Forugh Farrokhzad, Sohrab Sepehry and Omar Khayyam – the titles *Where is the Friend's House* and *The Wind Will Carry Us* (*Bad ma ra khahad bord*) come from poems by Sepehry and Farrokhzad respectively. It is not that Kiarostami provides a filmic version of the poetry of these masters or of Wittgenstein's philosophy; indeed, nothing in his films suggests Kiarostami's familiarity with Wittgenstein's thought. However, as Read suggests when discussing works of certain filmmakers, it is 'perhaps increasingly obvious that films think, that films are no longer merely to be viewed as illustrative material for pre-existing philosophies ... nor as illustrative material for pre-existing ideologies or theories' (2005: 31).

Similarly, Kiarostami's films could also be seen as films that think, not as depictions of pre-existing philosophies, but as re-thinking within the context of existing ideas, thoughts and beliefs. As such, these films contain certain philosophical concerns that parallel Wittgenstein's philosophy. As Mulhall argues in discussing certain films as philosophy, Kiarostami's films could be read as 'philosophy in action':

> I do not look to these films as handy or popular illustrations of views and arguments properly developed by philosophers; I see them rather as themselves reflecting on and evaluating such views and arguments, as thinking seriously and systematically about them in just the ways that philosophers do. Such films are not philosophy's raw material, not a source for its ornamentation; they are philosophical exercises, philosophy in action – film as philosophising (Mulhall, 2002: 2).

In studying the similarities between the approaches of Kiarostami and Wittgenstein, I have based most of my readings on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. I am aware how Wittgenstein moved away from his views on religion as articulated in the *Tractatus*. However, his subsequent change of position regarding religion has not made this important philosophical treatise irrelevant. The very fact that it remains a widely-studied reference within academia says much about its continuing validity and relevance. Interestingly, even Kiarostami's works could be seen as evolving works that inform each other. He sometimes refers to a theme in one film and then picks it up again in another film to elaborate on and study it further. This could be regarded as a philosophy growing and evolving, with the films thinking and informing each other. The later films do not make his earlier approaches redundant or irrelevant. They remain as relevant and valid approaches to thinking about those particular themes.

An alternative approach to religion

The engagement of modern philosophy with metaphysics involved two main trends. One, associated with Hume and Ayer, dismissed such beliefs in metaphysics as intellectually misguided, and the other, that of Kant and Wittgenstein, sought to restore a sense of its integrity and validity, but in terms different from those of medieval philosophy and theology. Ayer, a positivist, attacks metaphysics for being unverifiable and disqualifies it from sense (Ayer, 1950: 116). He does not claim it to be false, but makes a far more powerful claim by dismissing it totally as nonsensical. The narrowness of this philosophy is reflected in the equation of sense and verifiability. In this way it destroys the richness of living by failing to appreciate interpretations of reality that are outside the physical world. 'Kant readily acknowledged the threat which a modern scientific worldview poses for morality and religion, yet ... he emphasised an individualism that affirmed human moral autonomy and freedom' (Jasper, 2003: 291)

Wittgenstein dismisses the principle of verification as an all-encompassing tenet that could be applied to everything. According to the nature and limits of verification itself, only states of affairs are verifiable and anything beyond the facts cannot be subject to verification. Hence, claiming that the mystical is not verifiable and is therefore nonsensical is in itself a nonsensical claim. 'Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is' (Wittgenstein, 2001: 44). The certainty of belief is stronger than the certainty of a scientific prediction, yet the object of belief is not predictable.

While Wittgenstein restores the validity of the mystical in metaphysics, which guides humans in their lives, he does not endorse medieval philosophy or theology. Human language, Wittgenstein asserts, is incapable of explaining the mystical. The religious, however, are tempted to make the mistake of explaining it, which only results in pseudo-explanations. The moment an explanation is offered, the mystery and wonder of the mystical is destroyed. Wittgenstein explains this as a problem of human language, inherent in which is the tendency to convert metaphysics into facts. Indeed, he states, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent' (Wittgenstein, 2001: 7).

Wittgenstein explains religion as a double-edged knife, which is poetic with rich culture on the one side, and full of danger and dogmatic on the other. Notions of faith such as God, death and eternity can be talked about poetically, but cannot be talked about as facts. In trying to explain God, religion sometimes turns Him into an idol. What is mystical and can be spoken of poetically and symbolically, therefore, becomes an idol. The unutterable has to be conveyed in a different way: it has to be shown. In proposition 6.522 of his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein maintains that 'There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical' (2001) He does not claim that the religious language is false or 'waste time garnering evidence for the falsity of religion. Rather, he focuses upon the discourses of religion and shows how it lacks the pictorial relation to the world essential for the possession of meaning' (Clack, 1999: 28). It is not only religion that becomes irrelevant to the mystical:

> Science is about empirical, contingent and verifiable matters. Metaphysics is not about contingent, empirical or verifiable matters. It is about what is absolute and necessary. But language is not geared to coping with the absolute and the necessary. As Wittgenstein puts it, certain signs in a metaphysical proposition lack meaning...But he did not conclude...that this rendered metaphysics inarticulate. It is

> just that the articulation is somewhat different from the statement of scientific and common-sense facts (Barrett, 1991: 74).

Thus, Wittgenstein aims at restoring the non-scientific form of understanding. 'Among those things that "show themselves are ethics, aesthetics, religion, the meaning of life, logic and philosophy". In all these areas, Wittgenstein appears to believe, there are indeed truths, but none of these truths can be expressed in language; they all have to be shown, not said' (Monk, 2005: 21). The realm of religion differs from that of the intellect. Clack mentions the two ways that Wittgenstein believed the mystical could be shown: 'a particular way of living as well as artistic creation which can mediate what is higher' (1999: 52). The fact that the faith view does not fall into the trap of providing evidence renders it better than the religious view in Wittgenstein's philosophy. 'Religious belief is the upshot of a kind of life, a kind of upbringing, which culminates in a certain sort of belief' (Vasiliou, 2001: 39).

It is this philosophical outlook on religion that makes for interesting comparisons with Kiarostami's works. Kiarostami, too, as the analysis of his films in this chapter will demonstrate, alludes to the mystical in a way that resonates with Wittgenstein's thought. He does not avoid dealing with the religious view, as many of his critics claim he does. In fact, he presents an array of religious discourses without trying to prove them true or false, before proposing an alternative approach to religion. He also contemplates the relevance of scientific knowledge to the mystical in some of his films. In fact, Kiarostami's films could be read as an endeavour towards the artistic creation that Wittgenstein refers to as being one of the ways of showing the

mystical. When asked if serious art creates a desire in the spectator for some other reality, Kiarostami says:

> Yes, I believe so, because otherwise art would have no purpose. Should religion not prove successful at accomplishing that mission, art always can attempt it. They both point in the same direction. Religion points to another world, whereas art points to a better existence. One is an invitation, an offering to a faraway place, the other to a place that is close (Walsh, 2000)

Reading Life and Death in Kiarostami's Films

One of the main philosophical concerns in a large proportion of Kiarostami's recent films is death and life. A search for the friend that began in *Where is the Friend's House* (*Khane-ye doost kojast?* 1987) continues in *And Life Goes On* (*Zendegi va digar hich*, 1992), only this time, the danger is no longer that of the barking dogs and dark alleys of Koker village but a catastrophe that has wiped out the friends and loved ones of many. Kiarostami's subsequent film, *Through the Olive Trees* (*Zir-e derakhtan-e zeytoon*, 1994), also looks at the aftermath of the earthquake. These three films have been referred to as the *Koker Trilogy* in the West. The tens of thousands of lives that were lost to the 1990 earthquake in Iran were the starting point for a series of Kiarostami's films that have death as a prominent underlying theme.

The traditional discourses

Natural disasters have usually led to the theist's attempt to understand the reasons why God has afflicted people with such adversity. It is during such times that man's reasoning about the question of evil is heightened. Ingmar Bergman depicts this

quest in his *Seventh Seal* (1958) in which people try to understand why so many lives are lost to Black Death across Europe. Similarly, in *And Life Goes On* and *Through the Olive Trees*, the survivors and those witnessing the aftermath of the earthquake strive to make sense of the catastrophe. Kiarostami presents us with an array of ruminations about death, God and evil.

Kiarostami enables us to gain an insight into how the local people are trying to make sense of the tragedy in their own vocabulary. He does not strip them of their understanding nor does he force his own upon the viewer. When the truck driver caught up in the heavy traffic in *And Life Goes On* asks: 'What sin has this nation committed to be punished by God like this?' it is a question that assumes the earthquake to be the result of people's wrongdoing. Similarly, Husayn, in *Through the Olive Trees*, calmly interprets the deaths as a direct result of the villainy of individuals. He had fallen in love with Tahereh when working as a mason in a building right across her house. However, when he approached her mother to ask for her hand in marriage, she not only rejected him but also made sure that he lost his job. In Husayn's view, Tahereh's parents and his employer were killed in the earthquake for conspiring against his wish to marry Tahereh—their deaths being a punishment for breaking his heart.

Death as God's punishment for wrong-doing could be read within the context of traditional scripture and the subsequent interpretations of believers. Chapter 7 of the Qur'an, 'The Heights', forewarns the faithful about disbelief in God and His Messenger:

> And if people of the townships had believed and kept from evil, surely We should have opened for them blessings from the sky and from the earth. But (unto every

messenger) they gave the lie, and so We seized them on account of what they used to earn.

Are the people of the townships then secure from the coming of Our wrath upon them as a night-raid while they sleep?' (7: 96-97).

In fact, this Qur'anic chapter relates numerous accounts of punishments inflicted on those who disobeyed God and His prophets. Thus, the people of Noah were drowned for not believing him (7: 60-64), the root of the tribe of Aad was cut down for disbelieving Hud (7: 65-72), the people of Thamud were destroyed by an earthquake for disobeying a prophet sent down to them (7: 73-78), the people of Lot destroyed by a heavenly rain poured upon them for their lewd acts (7: 80-84), the people of Midian were seized by an earthquake for disobeying Shuayb (7: 85-93 and 29: 36-37) and the Pharaoh's folk who did not follow Moses were punished with flood, locusts, vermin, blood and the drowning sea. Even Moses' own folk who were led astray were not spared and subsequently punished by an earthquake (7: 103-155). These are just some of the examples of natural disasters described in the Qur'an as a consequence of people's wrongdoing.

Inherent in suffering is the problem of evil, raised for centuries among the monotheistic religions. If God is omniscient, omnipotent and wholly good, why is there so much suffering in the world? In *And Life Goes On,* for the old Mr Ruhi, the earthquake is not a punishment sent down by God, rather it is like 'a hungry wolf that attacked a flock of sheep and ate some and spared others.' It is an event that he believes will also result in a better appreciation of life by those who survived. Mr Ruhi sees the disaster as a result of the forces of nature rather than God's intentions, endorsing the theodicy that good, and in this case a better appreciation of life, requires the existence of evil.

Similarly, the woman who has lost her seven-year-old daughter attempts to come to terms with her loss and consoles herself by saying that it was what God willed. The young boy acting as Kiarostami's son, on the other hand, is keen to retain God's goodness. He draws from the various analogies he has come across to exempt God from intending to kill an innocent seven-year-old. These range from the analogy of the hungry wolf and a better appreciation of life espoused by Mr Ruhi, to the story of Abraham and Ishmael in his own history book. This is indicative of the transmission and reinforcement of a system of knowledge and beliefs through the generations ranging from the ancient narrative of Abraham's sacrifice to what the young boy has heard from Mr Ruhi only moments before. Indeed, when the mother asks the boy where he has learnt all of this from, he says: 'half from Mr Ruhi, half from my history book and half from myself', a response that alludes to the power of narrative and oral tradition in forming a worldview which transcends history.

Kiarostami thus presents us with a range of arguments on the issue of death, whilst he himself remains silent in the face of these theistic debates. In fact when the truck driver asks him what sin the nation has committed to be punished by God in this way, he evades the question, saying instead, 'Give me way so that I can escape by the side road' implying his reluctance to engage in such theological reasoning. He is, perhaps, seeking a 'side road' in order to avoid the heavy traffic of the dominating religious debates. Kiarostami's search for an alternative way is not an attempt to avoid contemplating issues of death and suffering. Rather, it is a provocative proposal to re-evaluate our preconceived beliefs. In his opinion, 'Cinema and all

other arts ought to be able to destroy the mind of their audience in order to reject the old values and make us susceptible to new values' (quoted in Elena, 2005: 192).

A Kiarostami film is constituted not only by what is said or shown on screen, but also, more often than not, by the unsaid and hidden, which is in fact of greater significance. To use his own words, Kiarostami wants to 'create the type of cinema that shows by not showing' (quoted in Elena, 2005: 154). It is his approach of 'showing by not showing', 'saying by not saying' that makes interesting parallels with Wittgenstein's philosophy. When Wittgenstein sent the manuscript of his *Tractatus* to Ficker to be considered for publication, he explained that his book consisted of two parts:

> I once wanted to give a few words in the foreword which now actually are not in it, which, however, I'll write to you now because they might be a key for you: I wanted to write that my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have *not* written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I'm convinced that, *strictly* speaking, it can ONLY be delimited in this way. In brief, I think: All of that which *many are babbling* today, I have defined in my book by remaining silent about it (Wittgenstein, 1979: 94-95)

Wittgenstein's silence to 'that of which many are babbling today' is echoed in Kiarostami's refusal to explicitly comment on specific religious views, such as death and suffering. In fact, through the medium of cinema he materialises Wittgenstein's great desire of showing that which the limits of language make impossible to talk about. In his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein suggests that a particular way of looking at the world constitutes 'the mystical' (Clack, 1999: 37):

> 6.44 It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.
>
> 6.45 To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole – a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical.

Like Wittgenstein, Kiarostami finds the world's existence itself to be the mystical. Unlike the usual dead bodies and mourning relatives which constitute the main mise-en-scène of earthquake films, as seen for example, in *Wake Up Arezu* (*Bidar show Arezu,* Ayari, 2005)—a recent film based on the 2003 earthquake in Bam which was also filmed on location—in Kiarostami's films, the beauties of nature provide the backdrop for life that strives to continue in face of all adversity. We see people digging, not in search of bodies, or to bury the dead, but to find the means of living, be it digging for a kettle, a carpet, a pillow, a lamp, or indeed setting up television antennas to follow the World Cup. Kiarostami's camera does not avoid the destruction that the earthquake has left in its wake, rather he sees through it: the destroyed shells of windows and doors, standing empty in the rubble, frame a world of beauty. Instead of focusing his lens on death and suffering, Kiarostami redirects our gaze to man's struggle for life, and the existence of the world itself becomes the object of wonder and mystery. Commenting on *And Life Goes On,* Kiarostami remarks that what he needed to address was 'life, the continuity of life itself, not individuals and their fate, though that is the starting point for the larger lesson' (quoted in Nichols, 1994: 25).

Death as desire

In *Taste of Cherry,* death finds a new twist. It is turned on its head from being the cause of pain and suffering to being an object of desire. The film revolves around Badii, a middle-aged man who wants to commit suicide in a very particular way—by taking an overdose of sleeping pills at night and sleeping in a hole dug under a lone tree in the mountains outside Tehran. However, he wants someone to come and

check on him the following morning in order to help him out of the hole if he is still alive, or bury him if he is dead. He drives around in his car looking for that one person. Death in *Taste of Cherry*, therefore, becomes an act sought by an individual, rather than a tragic incident inflicted upon masses as in the last two instalments of the *Koker Trilogy*. The conflicts of death and life are also reversed such that Badii's actions become an attempt to claim death, rather than death claiming life.

As in the *Koker Trilogy*, in *Taste of Cherry* (*Ta'm-e gilas*) we are presented with various theological arguments. However, this time they are not employed to justify death and misery, but rather to preserve the sanctity of life itself. Badii gives lifts to the people he thinks may be potential helpers. One of them is an Afghan seminarian who listens attentively to Badii, then quotes from the Qur'an and hadith and employs the religious vocabulary of God, sin and punishment in order to dissuade Badii from wanting to kill himself. Badii, however, dismissively responds to him by stating: 'You can understand me, you can pity me, but you can't feel my pain ... the only thing I need from you right now is a pair of hands.'

Badii finally comes across Baqeri, a middle-aged taxidermist working at the natural history museum. Baqeri takes Badii on a new route, different from the desolate landscape in which he was driving thus far. This route, Baqeri states, is longer, but more beautiful. He agrees to help Badii not only because of the money he needs for his sick child, but also as an act of friendship. Baqeri states that he would have preferred to save a life rather than help to take it away, but that he also wants to be a friend to Badii. As a friend, therefore, he would be there for him even during difficult times.

In discussing the ending of *Taste of Cherry,* Elena finds it to bear 'some extraordinarily rich connotations. The storm that breaks just as Badii is getting into the grave and the specific image of the cloud crossing the moon refer to the imagery of the Day of Judgement in Islamic tradition' (Elena, 2005: 141), quoting the Qur'an 25: 25 and 18: 19 in support of this reading. Elena also goes on to say that Kiarostami's use of Louis Armstrong's trumpet in *St James Infirmary* reminds one of the trumpet of the angel of resurrection, Israfil, of the Persian Islamic tradition. Kiarostami himself, however, has another explanation for his use of this music in the film:

> This music, funeral music played over a dead body, interested me because of the sensuality of Louis Armstrong's trumpet-playing, particularly cheerful and optimistic in spite of everything, which expresses very well that idea of life that the film tries to convey. A piece of music that in this sense is I think very close to the poetry of Khayyam, where joy finally emerges from sorrow (quoted in Elena, 2005: 142).

Optimism and cheerfulness in the face of death and despair? Kiarostami certainly does not endorse a nihilistic approach to life, celebrating nothingness. However, Badii's encounter with the taxidermist, Baqeri, might well be the reason for this hopefulness. Baqeri offers him a different route—both literally and metaphorically—a longer but more beautiful route, a reference to a life which might be longer and perhaps, therefore, entail more difficulties, but nonetheless worth the beauty that one experiences along the way. More importantly, the hopefulness may also be the result of Baqeri's friendship. Instead of warning Badii of punishment and a God who despises the sinner, Baqeri empathises with him and agrees to carry out his wishes as a final act of friendship.

All along, perhaps, Badii's quest was not for someone to help him in his death, but instead a search for a friend, and for meaning. Thus, Badii's encounter with Baqeri is not significant only because the latter invites him to appreciate the beauties of nature and the joys of life despite its concomitant difficulties, which, to expand upon Kiarostami's point above, would constitute only half of a typical Khayyam quatrain. It is also significant because having a friend on this journey, painful and difficult as it might be, is what makes life bearable and meaningful. This theme—that the temporality and struggle of life is balanced by the good fortune of having a friend to share in this journey—is an enduring trope in Persian poetry. Badii's success in finding a friend, knowing that he would be there the following morning, can be seen as the 'joy' that 'finally emerges from sorrow'.

This may be the reason why Kiarostami decides to leave the outcome of Badii's suicide attempt ambiguous. For Badii's achievement is not dependent on the success or failure of his suicide, but rather on the journey he had begun. His very method of choice in committing suicide leaves him with two possibilities—death or life—as opposed to a definitive method of death. In other words, if the sleeping pills are ineffective, Badii wants to be able to come out of the hole, instead of, for example, taking more pills. He is even worried that Baqeri might bury him alive, mistaking him to be dead when he might have only fallen asleep. This leads one to believe that Badii does not intend to take complete control over ending his life, thus leaving room for an unseen power or grace to intervene. He gambles with fate like the knight in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957) who plays chess with Death. Both protagonists are in search of the meaning of life. Thus, if some form of divine

intervention were to take place, a friend would pull Badii out. He would then be redeemed through the act of suicide and his life would have meaning and purpose.

Kiarostami also delves into the semiotics of Islamic theology in naming his protagonist. 'Badii' means 'unprecendented', 'unique', from the Arabic root 'bada'a', which is also the root for 'bida'a', meaning 'heretical doctrine' or heresy or (undesirable) innovation. Historically in Islam, the term has been used to refer to Muslims who deviate from 'orthodox' practices. The semiotics of this name could be read in two different ways: the fact that Badii wants to commit suicide in this specific manner is likely to be without precedent. Moreover, the very specific manner in which he intends to be buried implies a doing-away with Islamic burial rites. Thus, he is not only a sinner for taking his life but also a heretic for creating new rituals that go against normative practice.

Suicide, one of the cardinal sins in Islam, becomes the protagonist's goal and desire in *Taste of Cherry.* The religious discourse of the Afghan seminarian clearly fails to respond meaningfully to certain life situations. The seminarian understands what Badii wants from him, but is bound by his belief system and instead employs his own trope of religious vocabulary to try to change Badii's mind. In discussing the character of the seminarian, Kiarostami remarks that 'the man of religion is the embodiment of a certain discourse and philosophy that imposes *a priori* the boundaries between Good and Evil. With this character I wanted to show, beyond religious dogmatism as such, all those social conventions that are imposed on us without any real justification' (quoted in Elena, 2005: 135).

As Wittgenstein states, however, notions of faith cannot be stated as fact, but rather only spoken of poetically. Baqeri, the very man who has agreed to be an accomplice to Badii's suicide, is the one who talks about life poetically. He invites Badii to view the intricate beauties of nature and appreciate the pleasures they convey. He does not engage in a religious discussion by referring to sin and punishment. In fact, he invokes God only once, and that, too, not as the One Who despises the sinner, but Whose compassion exceeds that of any mother. In Baqeri's view, the compassion is evident from all the beauty that He has offered man. He then asks Badii if he would no longer want to see the sunrise, the red and yellow of the sunset, the stars, the full moon in the sky and, more importantly, to experience the taste of a cherry. Kiarostami's use of this last experience as the title of the film emphasises the significance of this conversation and the message it implies. Baqeri poetically talks about the notions of life, death, and God and conveys the unutterable by showing these to him when he takes Badii on a different route. Kiarostami communicates without trying to restrict the inexpressible to words, in as much as 'Wittgenstein's ideal is to communicate the inexpressible by *not* attempting to express it' (Monk, 2005: 25).

Death as an object of scientific study

So far, Kiarostami's dialogical films examined the various approaches to death. In all of these films, death was a matter of emotional import. In *The Wind Will Carry Us,* Behzad, the educated Tehrani, comes to the village with the sole purpose of documenting the rites and ceremonies surrounding death, an act that is devoid of any emotional involvement for him. His interest in death arises not out of passion or a

quest for meaning. Instead, he eagerly awaits the old woman's death, only because it will provide him with footage for his documentary. Her death would, therefore, be simply an object of scientific study.

This time, Kiarostami takes on the challenge of questioning the scientific approach to death and life. To all intents and purposes, Behzad is an anthropologist, albeit with a cold and unconcerned approach, interested in studying the rites and rituals of death, in a social group different from his own. In fact, so reluctant is he to miss this opportunity that, to his mother's extreme displeasure, he refuses to leave the village and attend the funeral of a close relative. For him, death is solely a dispassionate object of study and nothing more. His obsession with death is symbolised by the leg-bone he keeps on top of his car dashboard. His impatient wait for the old woman's death is not a passionate pursuit of meaning or understanding. Instead, death is a commodity to be sought after, a scientific assignment to be completed.

Behzad's limited engagement with the local adults includes the schoolteacher and the doctor. Both, by virtue of their jobs, would have been trained in a modern educational system, thus presuming a closer affinity with Behzad. However, as Behzad finds out, their scientific training does not appear to have shaped their outlook on life in the way that it has formed his. The formal training of the doctor appears to be incidental to what he does, and unlike Behzad, he does not seem to be defined by it. When Behzad asks the doctor about the old woman's illness, he says it is very painful and that she is suffering a lot. However, death, he asserts, is worse than illness. 'It is the worst of everything'. In what seems to be an echo of Baqeri in *Taste of Cherry*, the doctor states that death is being deprived of the wonders of

nature, its beauty and God's blessing and generosity. Once you have left this world, he states, there is no coming back and that is a great loss.

Both the doctor and Behzad are constantly on the move, Behzad looking for a subject to film or study and the doctor looking for patients wanting to undergo circumcision or ear-piercing. Behzad, however, moves in the enclosed space of his car, with its grimy windscreen, where he cannot see the world clearly. Behzad thus seems blind to all the life around him, focusing instead on death and impatiently awaiting its arrival, while the doctor travels on a motorbike, which allows him to take in all the visual beauty around him.

As Kiarostami reminds us, knowing poetry is different from having a poetic outlook. Both the doctor and Behzad are men of verse. We have already heard Behzad recite poetry to Farzad, the young boy who acts as his guide at the beginning of the film, and to Zaynab, the lover of the telecommunications digger. It is Behzad who recites Forugh Farrokhzad's famous poem on death and despair, and from which Kiarostami borrows the title of the film. This latter scene has been the subject of much analysis and criticism, which I will not, however, enter into here. What is important to note for the purposes of this chapter, is that Behzad's use of poetry betrays his sense of superiority over the locals. This is evident in his surprise at Farzad's knowledge of poetry, and the patronising tone with which he addresses Zaynab when asking her if she knows who Forugh is. For the doctor, however, Khayyam's poetry has something to say about life and death that equips him with a different understanding of the world. Behzad appears to be one of those people that Wittgenstein refers to in *Culture and Value* (1980) as those who 'think that scientists exist to instruct them,

poets, musicians, etc. to give them pleasure. The idea *that these have something to teach them* – that does not occur to them.' (quoted in Monk, 2005: 102).

If indeed Kiarostami's films pose philosophical questions that resonate strikingly with those of Wittgenstein, his poetic discourse is deliberately and consciously rooted in Persian tradition. He speaks of taking refuge in poetry at times of conflict and anxiety, asserting that 'poetry is much more helpful in times of difficulty than in times of calm; it enables us to find a certain stability, an internal energy. When religion cannot fill this void, poetry can do so' (quoted in Elena, 2005: 189). Thus, we hear Sepehry's poetry echoing in Kiarostami's films: 'Let's not fear death.... Let's not close the door on the living.' Kiarostami certainly invites us to 'float on the spell of the red rose' as Sepehry asks us to do, for 'It's not our job to know the mystery of the red rose' (Sepehry, 1988: 163-181)

Like many of Kiarostami's other films, *The Wind Will Carry Us* did not follow a strictly written script, but developed on location. Kiarostami's initial plan was to document the death of the old woman. However, the film turns into a questioning of such an approach itself. Once again, Kiarostami's film questions our pre-determined notions, and this time it is the superiority of science over arts. One of the foci of Wittgenstein's philosophy was also the impotency of science in addressing certain aspects of life. In his view,

> the subject matter, questions, problems and solutions of philosophy are fundamentally different from those of the natural sciences because they are not empirical in character. While the natural sciences aim to explain empirical phenomena, philosophy is concerned exclusively with something that antecedes and is separable from empirical inquiry: namely, questions of sense and meaning (Allen and Turvey, 2001: 4).

Behzad's experience in the village, however, transforms him and he is no longer interested in documenting the death ceremonies. Alain Bergala reads the ending of the film, where Behzad throws the leg-bone into the river and washes his windscreen, as a shot that

> elegantly and brilliantly, brings to a close the most important discourse in this enigmatic film, which is the re-education of the gaze.... Now [Behzad] has found a new way of looking at the world, one that is free of all impure motivations and from any utilitarian mentality, open to whatever might happen unexpectedly on the uncontrollable fringes of vision, ready to accept the enigma of 'otherness'. The grimy windscreen, through which Kiarostami has refused to let his own vision as a film-maker focus, is now perfectly clean. (quoted in Elena, 2005: 158-159).

Kiarostami leads us to look at the world in a different way. For this, his films take us on a journey that questions our convictions—whether religiously or scientifically biased—whilst gently offering an alternative way of looking. One of the main themes in Wittgenstein's later works is the 'importance of preserving the integrity of *non-scientific* forms of understanding, the kind of understanding characteristic of the arts' (Monk, 2005: 101). Behzad epitomises this scientific understanding, one that engulfs his perception of life in *The Wind Will Carry Us*. Moreover, Kiarostami leads us to look at the world in a different way. The 're-education' of the gaze subtly alluded to in the film is where Kiarostami, Wittgenstein and Sepehry converge. Wittgenstein emphasises not only 'on showing the reader things that cannot be said, but on getting the reader to see things afresh' (Monk, 2005: 65). And just as Sepehry (1995) first asks:

> I don't know why the good nature of horses
> and the beauty of the pigeons have won repute,
> why no vulture is kept as a pet.

And only then proceeds to propose that

> We need to rinse our eyes and view
> Everything in a different light.
> We should cleanse our words
> To be both wind and rain.

Conclusions

Depicting the sacred through the profane in a medium such as film is a challenge for any director wishing to address the metaphysical without falling into the trap of the dogmatic. Kiarostami is no exception and he counters this challenge with a unique approach. His films are poetic philosophies that contemplate man's existence and its meaning. They are, as Wittgenstein states, one of those 'artistic creations which can mediate what is higher' (Clack, 1999: 37). Even though his films demonstrate certain theological or philosophical ideas, he does not attempt to prove the truth or untruth of any of these claims. Instead, his references to the mystical go beyond that of any religious or scientific debate. As Wittgenstein states, human language is incapable of explaining the mystical. The religious, however, are often tempted to make the mistake of explaining it. The moment an explanation is offered, the mystery and wonder of the mystical is destroyed. Kiarostami does not offer an explanation; he just points to another way of looking, allowing his audience to arrive at a certain understanding themselves. Both Kiarostami and Wittgenstein emphasise showing the viewer/reader a way to see things afresh. To quote his own words, when asked if serious art creates a desire in the spectator for some other reality, Kiarostami says:

> Yes, I believe so, because otherwise art would have no purpose. Should religion not prove successful at accomplishing that mission, art always can attempt it. They both

> point in the same direction. Religion points to another world, whereas art points to a better existence. One is an invitation, an offering to a faraway place, the other to a place that is close (Walsh, 2000).

The question of life and death is certainly one of Kiarostami's main philosophical deliberations, evident in his numerous films that deal with this issue. It, therefore, provides us with an interesting study of how his films are 'philosophy in action' and how they deliberate about religion. In all these films (*And Life Goes On, Through the Olive Trees, Taste of Cherry* and *The Wind Will Carry Us*) not a single dead body or dying person is actually shown. There are long shots of burial scenes but no close-ups. Like many of Kiarostami's hidden characters whom we never see but get to know, death is also present but not staring us in the face. Instead, Kiarostami poetically thinks about the question of life, death and suffering.

This approach is not argued to the exclusion of any other understanding of death and suffering; rather, it finds significance through its contrasts. Many of the religious discourses articulated in relation to life and death seem to fail in responding meaningfully to those facing it. It becomes evident that articulations of death as God's wrath and punishment, or as a necessity of the existence of evil for a better appreciation of good, or as a law of nature, lack, as Wittgenstein would argue, the pictorial relation to the world that is essential for the possession of meaning. In a culture that lays great emphasis on mourning rituals and ceremonies, Kiarostami invites us to rethink our approach to death and life. Like Wittgenstein's silence to 'that of which many are babbling today', Kiarostami, too, refuses to comment on any of the views that he introduces within the film. Instead, after he has presented us with the authoritarian accounts of the religious, the positivist, as well as the sceptic, he arrives at a poetic account of death and life. In line with Wittgenstein's thought,

Kiarostami's references to the mystical are different from scientific and common-sense statements. His films, therefore, as seen through the example of the theme of life and death, demonstrate a poetic philosophy, an approach that clearly stands out in comparison to the other approaches to religion and spirituality in Iranian films.

Having explored the philosophical approach to religion in this chapter, as well as the formalistic and mystical approaches in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively, the final chapter will study how cinema gives new life to a Shi'i expression that is communal and public, but unpopular within the formalistic approach.

Chapter 8: Cinema as a Reservoir for Cultural Memory

In February 2007, BBC Persian Radio reported on the latest trends of music and mobile ringtones in Iran during the month of Muharram, particularly those heard during the ninth and tenth day of Muharram (Tasu'a and 'Ashura). These did not fall into any of the two broad music categories popular in Iran—pop music, including Western and Iranian pop, or classical Iranian music. Rather, they were *nowheh khani* (singing *nowheh*). *Nowheh* are lyrics mourning Imam Husayn, the third Shi'i Imam, martyred at Karbala in the seventh century. One young man played the two different *nowheh* ringtones he had on his mobile phone for the interviewer. He explained that one *nowheh* was set as his general ringtone and the other was assigned to his 'chick' (girlfriend). Other interviewees also said that they changed over their mobile ringtones and their car CDs to *nowheh* to keep with the mood of this period.

Most interesting, however, was the interview with Hossein Tohi, an Iranian rapper, whose music is part of the Iranian underground music scene. Tohi (Hossein's self-styled name meaning 'empty' in Persian) was born in 1986 and is a computer student. Even though a number of rappers have emerged in Iran, only a few have gained official authorisation. The majority of the Rap-Farsi (Persian rap) singers remain part of the underground scene and disseminate their work mainly through the internet. Hossein Tohi relates how he woke up one morning in the early days of Muharram 2007 and felt like writing about Imam Husayn. He asked his composer friend, Mahdiyar, who was familiar with Eastern music, to compose music for his rap. The end result could be called rap-*nowheh*, with its lyrics praising the Imam and mourning his death, sung in rap-Farsi to music that also employed the traditional

percussions used in *nowheh*. Tohi, however, refuses to refer to it as *nowheh* and instead prefers to call it simply a rap about Imam Husayn and his companions (Tohi, 2007). Here is an extract of his rap about Imam Husayn, the first Muharram Rap[30]:

> The minute your name is mentioned, oh Master! [Imam Husayn],
> I do not know why my tears start running and the love in my heart increases.
> You are the greatest of martyrs and noblemen,
> It has been years since your death
> But your name still remains alive, oh Master!
> I pray I will have the opportunity
> Barefoot to come and visit your shrine.
> Or for you to come at night to my land,
> And visit me in my dreams.
> You know that I carry your name,
> And would never want to stay away from you.
> Let me be your servant at your shrine,
> Or maybe you still do not find it deserving and, therefore, that is for the best.
> We beat our chests for you during Muharram,
> And in one voice say 'Oh, Husayn!' when we are with one another.
> Oh Master! Do have a look at us and put your hand on our shoulders,
> Take some of the burden from our shoulders.
> The truth is that I'm terrified,
> That you will leave me alone on the first night of my death…

The programme continued its report on the many different kinds of music produced over that past year for Muharram. These employ various music genres – some a fusion of the traditional *nowheh* music and others just pure pop music. Is this, as the interviewer asked, an updating of the Muharram mourning? However we define this music, this new form of lamenting for Imam Husayn has certainly attracted a large number of the youth, making quite untenable the claim that listening to *nowheh* is an outdated practice of the older, or more traditional, generation. In fact, the amalgam

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[30] Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Persian material in this chapter are mine.

of Shi'i religious concepts and modern musical genres has enabled a new medium of expression through which Iranian youth can more easily explore their Shi'i identity. However, trying to attract the youth to *nowheh* is not always considered a good enough excuse for 'reinventing' or 'modernising' traditional religious practices. Daneshmand is just one adherent of this latter school of thought.

Hujjatul-Islam Mehdi Daneshmand is an Iranian cleric and author of a number of books on religion. He is a frequent public speaker and delivers sermons in different parts of Iran. Daneshmand is highly entertaining, with a great talent for doing impressions and, unusually for a cleric, has no compunction about swearing during his speeches. The reach of his sermons now extends beyond the mosques and other public sessions, thanks to the virtual world of the internet and particularly YouTube. Some of his clips on YouTube have received hundreds of thousands of hits. Given the fact that the clips are in Persian and not subtitled, one can safely assume that most of his virtual audience are also Iranian. Not all of these audiences, however, can be classified as enthusiastic viewers, as some of obscenities left in the comments section testify. My main interest in Daneshmand's speeches, however, revolve around his references to the commemorative practices of Muharram, for they reflect an important sample of the current official religious attitudes towards them.

Daneshmand is critical of many aspects of these commemorative practices of Muharram. He particularly takes issue with the *maddah*s. *Maddah*s, literally eulogists, like the *rowzeh-khan* narrate stories of the Prophet, imams and saints. *Maddah*s are not necessarily trained in the madrasas and draw their material from a broad spectrum of literature, including their own compositions. Daneshmand

criticises the ways in which many of the current *maddah*s praise the Shi'i imams and the family of the Prophet. He holds these 'ignorant and uneducated' *maddah*s responsible for providing the Sunnis with the ammunition to condemn Shi'i rituals and practices. The internet, he states, is rife with Sunni sites that are anti-Shi'a and they use extracts from these *maddah*s to prove that Shi'as are heretics. His own selective extracts from the *maddah*s provides him with the perfect foil for condemning those religious ceremonies that are held independently of the ulama. Not only are the *maddah*s, therefore, framed as uneducated, uninformed and bereft of any religious knowledge, but more dangerously, their ignorance offers the enemies of Shi'ism an excuse to revile it! The audiences of these *maddah*s are not spared either. They are held equally responsible for attending these sessions and keeping quiet during such disgrace, which brings untold shame upon religion:

> A bunch of uneducated no-goods get together and chant 'Husayn, Husayn!' ... ... You beating your chest for three hours, how many sermons of Imam Husayn have you studied? How many books have you studied on Imam Husayn?
>
> ...I was in one of the provinces and I actually disrupted the session. The *maddah* there was singing: 'Hasan [Husayn's elder brother and preceding imam] has one dot [a reference to the dots in the Arabic/Persian alphabet], Husayn has three dots, Fatima [Husayn's mother, the Prophet's daughter] has one dot, Zaynab [Husayn's sister] has five dots, Wah! Wah!...' I said, 'Shut it, and why are you [the audience] wailing?' ... CDs of these sessions are made and then put on the internet and the Sunnis come and show it around and say: 'See! This is the share of the Shi'as [their contribution to Islam]....' What is this you [the *maddah*s] are saying? Don't you have brains?...Didn't Zaynab have sermons? Didn't she have speeches? ...What kind of a *rowzeh* is this that you are feeding people in the name of religion?

In another speech, he further criticises mourning sessions set up independently of the ulama which, therefore, result in heretical and blasphemous talk. The extract below, taken from his sermons, is yet another example of the tension between the laity and

the clergy discussed in Chapters 3 and 5. Religion, Daneshmand implies, should remain within the domain of the clergy whose prerogative it is to authorise religious rituals and practices. It is certainly not for the *maddah*s to bring in music as an accompaniment to their singing. For Daneshmand, the entire practice, whether it is the lyrics, the *maddah*s or the audience clapping their hands together, is problematic. It should be noted however, that the very fact that the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance broadcasts *nowheh*s with music, if not necessarily the exact ones that Daneshmand points to, on national radio and television, gives them some degree of legitimacy, if not outright endorsement. At the very least, it points to the plurality of practice sanctioned by the state even as it attempts to strike a delicate balance between filling in a gap 'demanded' by the laity, and being cognisant of the concerns of more conservative elements within the state who fear the erosion of their power and influence. As we shall see below, Daneshmand is conscious of this perceived sanction and addresses it squarely:

> A few *maddah*s, who have studied under only God knows which master, string together some rubbish so that they can supposedly attract the youth to them.
>
> ...
>
> When not even one *'alim* [singular of ulama] is present [in organising and guiding] your gathering, it is no surprise that the result is this kind of catastrophe.

Daneshmand then goes on to provide an example of lyric he had heard a *maddah* sing:

> 'I who hold on to the love of Husayn,
> Am only the dog of Husayn'
> For God's sake, what kind of a lyric is this?
> ...They say 'la ilaha illa Husayn' [There is no God but Husayn]... They've no clue what they're saying. This is blasphemy!!!...
> Tapes of this group of uncouth maddahs, who have distanced themselves from the ulama, are being distributed in Zahidan [a province bordering Pakistan], in the Arab

countries, in Saudi Arabia. This has closed the mouths of [i.e. silenced] the [Shi'i] ulama. They [the anti-Shi'a Sunnis] say you are heretics! You consider Fatima and Husayn as God!!!...The reputation of religion is not in the hands of these few maddahs.

They sing their *maddahi*s with the keyboard, with santoor [a traditional string instrument].

You've taken the bloody music into the pulpit, into the mihrab and into rowzeh as well!!!

The Ministry of [Culture and] Islamic Guidance that has spent millions and trillions of tomans on *daf* and *tonbak* [both traditional percussion instruments]. What does it want from *mihrab* and religion? Leave Husayn alone...leave religion alone...leave the keyboard for the television and radio, and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Wherever there are *tonbak*s, all the cameras are ready and present, but they don't want to have anything to do with a session of such grandeur [pointing to his own session]...

I have to say that religion has a master ...Husayn's head did not go on top of the spear so that I and you could get together now in his sessions and clap our hands and whistle, play the santoor, take the santoor inside the mihrab. Whoever has heard of maddahi with flute?! They justify that the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting shows it [these maddahis]; the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting shows a lot of things, like the struggle of the fittest in the jungle, should you imitate?... The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting is not a source of emulation (*marja'-e taqlid*), the radio is not a source of emulation, they cannot be the source of emulation, they cannot show jurisprudence.

Many Shi'i practices such as pilgrimage to the shrines of the imams and saints, and visual representations of the imams and the prophets, have been condemned by mainstream Sunnis.[31] Shi'as, however, have not necessarily thus shied away from rituals that may be perceived as 'unIslamic' by the Sunnis. Daneshmand's concerns about the 'malpractices' do not appear to stem solely from anxiety about believers

[31] This is not to say that these practices did not exist amongst Sunnis. For example, there are numerous Ottoman manuscripts that include depictions of the prophets.

losing salvation, but also about the disrepute that they can bring Shi'ism. This constant awareness of the 'Other's' perception and condemnation of 'Self' appears to precipitate attempts to comply and reconcile with what is acceptable to that 'normative' view, and, in turn, to shape local practices. One could even question if Sunni normativity is replacing Shi'i sensibilities. It is, therefore, pertinent to ask if the recent banning (in the Muharram of 2007) of certain practices, some of which had been observed for centuries in Iran, is a reaction to anti-Shi'a propaganda or a political discourse used to strategically condemn rival factions.

The official bans in 2007 included public displays of the images of the imams, the use of *alam*s (standards) during the mourning processions and the playing of instruments as part of the commemorative ceremonies. It is, however, debatable whether as individuals the Shi'as themselves will remove the pictures of the imams from their homes, shops or cafes. But for now, another video clip on YouTube very tellingly streams a *maddah* beating his chest and singing passionately in a very crowded mourning session: '*They can say whatever they want, I am the dog of Husayn!*' and the congregation beat their chests and repeat this refrain after him. Interestingly, a fragment of a silk and gold carpet dating from 1600-1625, and on display at the British Museum's *Shah 'Abbas: The Remaking of Iran*, bears *waqf* inscriptions referring to the Shah as 'the dog of this shrine'. Indeed, the exhibition catalogue cites additional references where Shah Abbas is referred to as 'the dog of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib' or 'the dog of the shrine' (Canby, 2009: 245). One can, therefore, safely assume that the phrase 'dog of Husayn' has been in currency for a long time within the Shi'i Iranian vocabulary and is not a recent innovation as Daneshmand would have it. The question posed above is obviously far more complex and requires

further research which lies outside the scope of this study. However, it is clear that the current commemorative events of Muharram are not just about Husayn and his message. Even though *ta'ziyeh* (the passion play) traditionally offered an opportunity to criticise the injustices of the privileged, a theme that will be discussed later in this chapter, recent events suggest new developments of the Muharram sessions. Interestingly, the Muharram commemorations have themselves turned into a battle for authority in defining what these commemorations do and do not entail. It is the official versus the popular discourse on Husayn, a battle that is not so easily won on either side.

Aside from the general populace, the events of Karbala and the martyrdom of Husayn have also inspired many filmmakers. The notion of martyrdom in its specific Shi'i tradition has been heavily employed in the war films made about the Iran-Iraq war, referred to as Sacred Defence Cinema (*Sinama-ye defa'-e moqqadas*). Other than a few exceptions, these are usually propagandist films, a genre that has already been extensively studied. In this chapter I will explore the ways in which film provides a new medium of expression for one of the oldest Shi'i narratives, highlighting the continuing impact of Husayn's story on Shi'i believers. I will first discuss the origins and development as well as the characteristics of *ta'ziyeh*, the oldest and until the modern period the 'only' Islamic drama, which re-enacts the events of Karbala. Next, I will examine how various filmmakers employ elements from *ta'ziyeh* in their filmic narratives. Like *ta'ziyeh*, many of these films include the historical and mythological in their narratives. In the final section, I will study how Kiarostami captures the continuing relevance of the martyrdom of Husayn in the Iranian Shi'i context.

Ta'ziyeh, the only Islamic drama

Ta'ziyeh is a re-enactment of the events that led to the death of Husayn b. 'Ali. Husayn was the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the third Shi'i imam after his brother Hasan b. 'Ali.

As described in Chapter 3, Husayn refused to submit to Yazid, the Umayyad caliph and was forced to camp at Karbala. Denied access to water and parched from thirst, Husayn and his companions were attacked on 'Ashura, the 10th day of the month of Muharram. By afternoon, Husayn and his men, including many children, were brutally slain.

Origins and development of ta'ziyeh

As discussed in Chapter 3, a few years after the death of Husayn, a group of the Kufan Shia gathered at Karbala to atone for betraying him. Calling themselves *tawwabun* or 'Penitents', their actions marked the beginnings of a new religious ritual. The first public commemoration of the mourning rituals for Husayn, however, is recorded to have occurred in 963 in Baghdad during the reign of the Shi'i Buyid Mu'izz al-Dawla. With the fall of the dynasty in 1055, the practice did not survive much longer.

The events of Karbala have been commemorated extensively in Iran, particularly with the advent of the Safavids in 1501 and the establishment of Shia Islam as the official religion of the state. The practice of *rowzeh-khani*, participation in the delivery of sermons about the tragedy of Karbala, also comes to the fore around this

time. As discussed earlier, Kashefi's *Rowzat al-shuhada'* (*Paradise of Martyrs*) became a popular text for *rowzeh-khani*. Mourning processions during the 10 days of Muharram, complete with standards, horses and drums, also become significant at this time. Even though theatrical elements were present in these rituals, the re-enactment itself of the events of Karbala, referred to as *ta'ziyeh* or passion play, are not found until the Zand period (1735-1787).

A few scholars have, however, traced the roots of *ta'ziyeh* to earlier, pre-Islamic Iranian rituals, such as *Siyawush-khani*. According to Iranian cultural tradition, Siyawush, the son of Kaykawus, the Persian emperor, was falsely accused by his step-mother, Sudabeh, of raping her. To prove his innocence, Siyawush had to undergo a trial by fire. He emerged unharmed out of this trial and was thus cleared of any wrongdoing. Later, he commanded his father's army against the invading forces of Afrasiyab, the king of Timur. Nevertheless, when Siyawush accepted the peace proposal offered by Afrasiyab, his father Kaykawus dismissed him and the peace treaty. Consequently, Siyawush joined Afrasiyab, who accepted him with open arms and even gave his own daughter to him in marriage. Siyawush's popularity and rising power displeased Afrasiyab's brother, who went on to instigate Siyawush's death.

Siyawush's innocent death some few thousand years ago was lamented by men and women and marked by many elegies. Minstrels would sing and recite these elegies, commemorating Siyawush's death. An archaeological discovery in the ruins of the city of Panjikent, 68km from Samarqand, provided further evidence of the connection between *Siyawush-khani* and the mourning rituals of Husayn. The

discovery was of a wall painting dating back to around 3000 BC. It depicts Siyawush in a large coffin, with a number of men and women surrounding the coffin, beating their faces, heads and chests. The resemblance of this depiction to the Shi'i Iranian mourning rites for Husayn is striking (Beyzaie, 2001: 31-32), rites that are also present in the *ta'ziyeh* performances.

Ta'ziyeh also appears to have evolved from a number of earlier pre-Islamic visual and performing arts such as *pardeh khani* (story-chanting) and *naqqali* (storytelling). In *pardeh khani,* the narrator uses a *pardeh* or painted screen that usually illustrates the various episodes of his narration. Screens used for the mourning of Husayn usually have depictions of the battle of Karbala, with some Qur'anic references and at times even stories from the national epic of *Shahnameh.* The *pardeh khan* then sings and recites the story pointing to the illustrations on the screen to elucidate the scene. Later, *ta'ziyeh* drew heavily from these depictions, as well as from the elegies of *pardeh khani, naqqali* and *rowzeh khani* themselves and the techniques of *naqqali* recitation.

Despite its religious motifs, *ta'ziyeh* did not at first meet with the approval of all the ulama. They objected to it on various theological grounds that condemned human representation in art, and the contentious issue of music (Homayuni, 2001: 61). Moreover, it allowed women to watch the play, providing a new space for their public appearance and participation. Most importantly, however, its great popularity became a threat to *rowzeh khani,* a ceremony that was customarily organised by the ulama, and from which they earned an income. However, others such as Mirza Abul Qasim Qommi (d. 1815/1816), a prominent religious authority living during the

reign of Fath 'Ali Shah (r. 1797-1834), supported *ta'ziyeh*. In a religious decision (*fatwa*), he 'unequivocally expressed the opinion that not only were religious plays lawful and not prohibited but that they were among the greatest of religious works' (Baktash, 1979: 107). This is comparable to the decision Khomeini was forced to make about cinema. With the Islamic Republic's victory in 1979, the ulama chose to endorse cinema by appropriating it for their own political purposes. While Khomeini opposed cinema's 'misuse', its adoption 'became an ideological tool to combat Pahlavi culture' (Tapper, 2002: 6).

Characteristics of ta'ziyeh

Ta'ziyeh started out as an outdoor performance, with simplicity of dialogue, props and *mise-en-scene*. With its growing popularity, however, the need for a permanent place was all too evident, and resulted in the building of the *tekiyeh*s. These were modelled after the local caravanserais, which were square or rectangular buildings with rooms on the perimeter overlooking a vast yard in the middle. The pond traditionally located at the centre of the yard was covered or replaced by a raised stage on which the actors would perform, surrounded on all sides by the audience.

Audience participation is one of the main features of *ta'ziyeh*. As Pelly states in his preface, 'If the success of a drama is to be measured by the effects which it produces upon the people for whom it is composed, or upon the audience before whom it is represented, no play has ever surpassed the tragedy known in the Mussulman world as that of Hasan and Husain' (1879). People cry and sympathise with the sufferings of the Imam and curse his enemies in the play. The actors are

called *shabih* or dramatisers. Each of the actors have the suffix '*-khan*' or 'reader' (of the manuscript) attached to their titles. Thus, each follower of Husayn is referred to as *mazlum-khan* (the reader of the oppressed), each of his enemies as *mukhalif-khan* (the reader of the opposition), the actor playing Husayn as *Husayn-khan* (the reader of Husayn) and Shimr, Husayn's slayer, *Shimr-khan* (the reader of Shimr). This serves to remind the audience that these individuals are, in fact, actors playing out the roles and not actually Shimr or Husayn. Thus, during the performance, the actor playing Shimr would himself cry, inviting the audience to join in his sobs, as he prepared to behead Husayn (Beyzaie, 2001: 137-141).

Music and poetry were an integral part of the *ta'ziyeh* performance. *Ta'ziyeh* scripts took the form of poetry. Unlike the poetry of the great Persian masters, *ta'ziyeh* was written in a language accessible to ordinary people. As Beyzaie emphasises, it was not a performance of poetry, but rather a performance employing poetry as its language (2001: 128). The poetic framework of *ta'ziyeh* drew from *marsiyeh* (poetry composed to lament the passing away of a beloved person) and the content of its constituent stories drew heavily from the various kinds of *naqqali.* In fact, the two distinct styles of *naqqali* are evident in *ta'ziyeh* dialogue. The melancholic words sung in a particular Iranian metre by the *mazlum-khan*s (the readers of the oppressed) are remnants of the religious *naqqali*, and the exaggerated recitation of *mukhalif-khan*s (readers of the opposition), replete with gesticulation and grandeur, is a remnant of epic *naqqali* (Beyzaie, 2001: 121). There were thus rules according to which the actors would recite the poetry. Those playing the followers of Husayn, the *mazlum-khan*s, were usually required to have a good voice and read or sing their

parts beautifully. The enemies of Husayn, on the other hand, were not required to sing, and instead shouted out their parts.

Ta'ziyeh made its way into the court and in the upper echelons of society. It reached its peak under Qajar patronage, a period referred to as the golden age of *ta'ziyeh.* Moreover, the emerging new social class of merchants and politicians also supported *ta'ziyeh.* In his travels to Europe, Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar (r. 1848-1896) developed a taste for European theatre. He wanted a playhouse similar in architectural style to the Royal Albert Hall in London. Subsequently, in 1869, he ordered the building of the magnificent Tekiyeh-Dowlat in Tehran, located on the south-eastern side of Golestan Palace. But even before it was completed, there were protests from the religious strata about the types of performances it might hold. The Shah, ultimately designated the building for *ta'ziyeh* performances (Homayuni, 2001: 82-3).

The Tekiyeh-Dowlat, the greatest playhouse ever to have been built in Iran, accommodated approximately 20,000 people. During the Qajar period when *ta'ziyeh* enjoyed royal patronage, many of the court scene props were provided by the palace. This transformed the traditionally simple performance into one with extravagant costumes and *mise-en-scene.* The dialogues correspondingly evolved along more elaborate lines. Jewels from the king's treasury would be used for the actors' costumes in order to give the performance a more real feel. Camels and various other animals were also brought onto the stage. The court women would personally sew and knit the costumes of actors (all men) playing the female roles of Yazid's court (Homayuni, 2001: 94). During the 10 days of Muharram, there were two daily *ta'ziyeh* performances—one in the afternoon, the other in the evening. There are

records of the attendance of foreign dignitaries and their families, who were invited to watch *ta'ziyeh* every day except 'Ashura (the 10th day of Muharram when Husayn was martyred). Non-Muslims were prohibited from watching *ta'ziyeh* or indeed the martyrdom of Husayn on 'Ashura (Homayuni, 2001: 92).

Whilst *ta'ziyeh* was performed in great grandeur and pomp in the courts, it retained its simpler forms in smaller towns and villages. By the time of Muhammad Shah Qajar (r. 1907-1909) and Ahmad Shah Qajar (r. 1909-1925), who were increasingly becoming Westernised, *ta'ziyeh* gradually came to lose its royal patronage (Beyzaie, 2001: 143). Many years later, Tekiyeh-Dowlat fell by the wayside under Reza Shah's modernisation project, which included a ban on *ta'ziyeh* performances. After the demolition of Tekiyeh-Dowlat, *ta'ziyeh* was pushed out of the bigger cities and into the suburbs and villages, where performers went in the hope of finding an audience. It is important to note that the decline of theatre was not limited to Iran, but extended throughout the world. According to Chelkowski, this worldwide crisis in theatre was the result of the 'advancement of film and television in the post-World War II period, together with a decline of religious ritual' (Chelkowski, 1979: 10).

Several Iranian filmmakers, however, have engaged with *ta'ziyeh* in their films. Through their re-interpretation of this older form of performing art, they have—even if inadvertently—reintroduced *ta'ziyeh* to their audiences. One can, therefore, argue that despite the destruction of Tekiyeh-Dowlat, the symbol of *ta'ziyeh*'s glorious period, the cinema screens revived some of the recognition and significance that *ta'ziyeh* once enjoyed. In the following sections, I will discuss the works of two very

different filmmakers, Beyzaie and Kiarostami, and their employment of *ta'ziyeh* in film.

Beyzaie, a filmmaker rooted in 'historical genealogy'

Bahram Beyzaie was born in Tehran in 1938. He is a distinguished playwright, screenwriter, film and theatre director, film editor as well as a scholar of the Iranian performing arts. He left his studies at the University of Tehran incomplete, and began his own independent research on Iranian theatre, epic literature, including Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, and the traditional plays of *ta'ziyeh*. His research also encompassed a study of pre-Islamic Persian history and Persian painting. Later, he extended his studies to Eastern art and spent a decade writing about it, as well as Iranian theatre and cinema. He made his first short film, *Uncle Moustache* (*Amu Sibilu*), in 1969 and in 1971 he produced and directed his first feature film *Downpour* (*Ragbar*).

Beyzaie is one of the Iranian *auteur* directors, whose works have been extensively studied both inside and outside Iran. He states that his fascination for the traditional Iranian arts – which is reflected in his cinematic works – stems from an interest in the lesser-studied field of understanding the lives of ordinary people (2001: 84). He clearly deems the familiarity of the filmmaker with historical genealogy to be a necessary component:

> ...many people still do not know why it is necessary to be rooted in a historical genealogy of one sort or another...In fact, when we look at some of the greatest films ever made, we note that the filmmaker has a literary, or visual, or theatrical history which is instrumental in his cinema. In Japanese cinema, in particular, you see the strong presence of Japanese theatre. It seems that in many instances, if one were to

> show a person walking in the street or any other daily activity, one need not have historical documentation to validate that act. Yet in other circumstances we need a more contemporary and philosophical expression of the history and culture of the past (Beyzaie, 2001: 81-82).

An unknown 'modernist' filmmaker

Beyzaie's deep knowledge of the Iranian performing arts, history and culture as well as his numerous contributions to the literary and art scene of the country over four decades have not, however, earned him an easy place within the field. A number of his films and plays have been banned by the government. These include *Ballad of Tara* (*Cherike-ye Tara*, 1979) and *Death of Yazdgerd* (*Marg-e Yazdgerd*, 1982), which have not yet received screening permits in Iran. His outspoken philosophical views cost him his tenure at the University of Tehran, shortly after the Islamic Revolution. Despite creating some of the masterpieces of Iranian cinema, he has not gained his due recognition outside Iran. Whilst Western scholarship in Iranian cinema has increased over the last two decades, very few scholars—mostly those with an Iranian background studying Iranian cinema—have paid attention to his work.

A simple search on Amazon.com and the Internet Movie Database IMDb is enough to indicate the meagre international recognition of his films. A search of Iranian DVDs on Amazon.com returned 46 films.[32] Whilst many Makhmalbaf, Kiarostami, Mehrjui and Majidi titles were listed, there was no trace of Beyzaie's films. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) – self-styled the Earth's Biggest Movie Database –

[32] The results are based on a search made on www.amazon.com and www.IMDb.com on 20 June 2007.

catalogues all 13 short and feature films directed by Beyzaie. However, the paucity of user comments hints at the limited international scope of his audiences and distribution of his films. Only four of his 13 films have received comments; *Rabid Killing* (*Sagkoshi,* 2001) has five comments, but the other three have received only one comment each. By comparison, Majidi's *The Colour of Paradise* (1999) alone had received 67 comments on IMDb. One commentator, Lalit Rao, reviewing Beyzaie's *Maybe Another Time* (*Shayad vaqti digar*, 1988), complains about the difficulty of finding his films, stating, 'I would like to explicitly remark that it is a great shame that almost all the films by Bahram Beyzaie have not been distributed widely on DVD. What are the DVD labels like Artificial Eye, Criterion Collection, Kino, New Yorker Films or Facets doing?' (19 April 2007 on IMDb).

Another commentator, Mehdi, liked *Rabid Killing*, but did not recommend it to non-Iranians:

> This film points to some kind of customs and cultures in Iran needs you to be an Iranian if you want to realize it. for whom they are outside of Iran and they've heard about Iranian cinema this could not be an interesting movie. because they will not get what is going on (IMDb, 23December 2003).

Many critics also regularly referr to this inaccessibility of Beyzaie's work, particularly for those who are unfamiliar with Persian history and culture. Beyzaie, in turn, has expressed his frustration with those who have labelled his films abstruse (Mahani, 2003). Whilst some critics regard Beyzaie's work as too specific to Persian culture, Maddadpur, the Iranian film critic whose work was analysed extensively in Chapter 4, regards his works as the best example of a 'Westoxicated' art, where myth and truth are mixed together. According to him, Beyzaie is incomprehensible to both his audience and the intellectuals who sing his praise (Maddadpur, 1995,

143). On the other hand, Dabashi, another critic also studied in Chapter 4, believes that Beyzaie manages to channel his attraction to Persian mysticism in a constructive direction (2002: 135). Even as critics and scholars disagree on whether or not Beyzaie is Western or exclusively Iranian, a mythologist or a neo-realist, accessible or indecipherable, one cannot deny the significance of his work in any serious study of Iranian cinema.

Beyzaie's obscurity on the international scene and his interest and use of traditional performing arts in cinema can be compared to the Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu (1903-1963). Burch argues that with the revival of the modernist movements in cinema in the 50s and 60s, modernist filmmakers looked eastwards for models of filmmaking (in Bordwell, 1997: 107). This included Japanese cinema and the introduction of directors such as Akira Kurosawa to the West in the early 1950s. Japanese cinema was rooted in its earlier traditional performing arts and 'derived from the aesthetic which emerged from the court culture of the Heian era (794-118) and which became the basis of Japan's traditional arts' (Bordwell, 1997: 108). Ozu was one of the directors, posthumously referred to as 'the greatest director of his generation in Japan'. His works, however, were considered 'too Japanese' to be included in international film festivals during his own time and were only reintroduced later in the 1970s (Bordwell, 1997: 107). Indeed, as with Ozu, one can argue that some of Beyzaie's works have not made it to the international festivals because they also are considered to be 'too Iranian' for recent festival tastes. It is, therefore, possible that whilst pre- and post-Revolutionary governments might have been less tolerant of his critical views, the international scene might have snubbed

him for his heavy use of Iranian mythology and/or unfamiliar traditional theatrical forms.

As mentioned, Beyzaie's use of theatre in cinema is not unprecedented. In fact, in its earliest forms, cinema was used to 'capture theatrical performances, such as pageants representing the life of Christ' (Bordwell, 1997: 13). Moreover, as early as the 1920s Brecht proposed the use of *Verfremdungseffekt*, translated as ' a distancing effect', or 'alienation effect' in film. He achieved this in his own films and they 'became a model of "presentational theatre", showing how to incorporate such antinaturalistic effects as direct address, impersonal recitation of lines and frank displays of the mechanics of lighting and staging' (Bordwell, 1997: 86). Interestingly, *ta'ziyeh* also employs various distancing techniques, such as speaking to the audience and referring to the actors as 'readers of' the characters they play. As mentioned earlier, in *ta'ziyeh* the 'reader of' the murderer of Imam Husayn (*Shimr-khan*), who is a Shia in real life, cries when he kills Imam Husayn and recites elegies to that effect, reminding the audience that what they see is just a performance. Beyzaie uses many of the theatrical forms of *ta'ziyeh* in his films, which distance the audience through the 'alienation effects' discussed above.

Like film history generally, Iranian cinema has experienced various movements, which have oscillated between coming close to theatrical forms and moving away from them. Beyzaie's cinema is towards the former extreme. While works of other filmmakers whether national or international who have broken away from conventional styles of filmmaking such as Kiarostami, Makhmalbaf, Majidi, Resnais, Antonioni, Godard and Ozu might have received international recognition

and exhibition (whether posthumously or in their own lifetimes) Beyzaie's works still remain largely unknown and undefined. There is evidence hinting that he faces greater challenges than others in obtaining the necessary local authorisation for the production, exhibition and distribution of his films and their international participation. Farhmand lists a series of incidents in which Beyzaie's films and his attendance at international festivals were cancelled by Iranian authorities. These include Beyzaie's jury membership at the 16th Turin International Film Festival in November 1999 as well as a film retrospective in his honour at the same festival, and the omission of his episode from the version of the *Tales of Kish* (Makhmalbaf, Jalili, Taqavi 1999) screened in Cannes (2002: 97-98). This marginalisation clearly cannot simply be due to his filmmaking techniques, which break away from the conventional Hollywood style. In fact, Iranian cinema has been recognised and lauded on the international scene for its distinctly different style of filmmaking. Beyzaie's reliance on the cultural and historical context of his subjects does not render his films incomprehensible any more than Majidi's reliance on Persian mysticism does, and audiences of his many-layered films might well draw different levels of meaning from them. The term 'modernist filmmaker' that I assign to Beyzaie in the section heading is more to challenge the usual preconceived assumptions about him than to categorise him as such. It is also to challenge the idea that Beyzaie is 'too local' and 'culturally porochial' to comprehend. Here, I will examine two of Beyzaie's works that draw from both the form and the content of *ta'ziyeh* in their narratives.

A retelling of Karbala through ta'ziyeh and film

Beyzaie has consistently maintained that it is his passion for understanding ordinary people and their cultural and historical roots that has driven his work and research. His screenplay *The Day of Incident (Ruz-e vaqe'eh)*, which he wrote in 1984, recounts one of the most important Shi'i Iranian narratives, the story of Karbala. *The Day of Incident* was not just an attempt to put *ta'ziyeh* on screen or to document a dying tradition. Instead, Beyzaie successfully brings the two elements of film and *ta'ziyeh* together and employs both the Western-secular medium and an Iranian religious tradition to retell the martyrdom of Husayn and his companions. Even though it is based on the historical incident of Karbala, it makes no claims to be a historical film. Instead, like *ta'ziyeh,* it encompasses in its narrative the larger Islamic historical and mythological elements as well as those that are specifically Iranian. Despite Beyzaie's numerous attempts to make the film, he failed to obtain the necessary permits. Finally, in 1994, the film was given to Shahram Asadi to direct. Beyzaie's solid script, however, did much to turn it into one of the best narratives on the events of Karbala, a narrative that is remarkably influenced by the elements of *ta'ziyeh.*

The Day of Incident won four awards, including best film in the 13th Fajr International Film Festival in 1994. Even though nominated, Beyzaie, did not win the best screenplay. Ten years later, in 2004, during the opening ceremony of the 22nd FIFF and on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, the achievements of those Iranians 'who have been the source of pride for Iranian cinema' (Rezadad, 2004: 16) were celebrated under three categories: Sacred Defence

Cinema (*Sinama-ye defa'-e moqqadas*), The Cinema of Revolutionary Ideals (*Sinama-ye armanha-ye enqelab*) and Religious Cinema (*Sinama-ye dini).* The first two categories have arguably been exhausted of their topics from the early days of post-Revolution cinema, with various events held to recognise and celebrate them. The third category of religious cinema, however, had not received serious attention before. This was evident from the fact that, unlike the other two categories, one film, *The Day of Incident* (Asadi, 1994) swept away all the commendations for Religious Cinema, with no other films in the running. It was also thought provoking to note that only *The Day of Incident* seemed to fit this newly created category (this was a year before the introduction of the 'Spiritual Cinema' category in 2005). Beyzaie was also commended—albeit ten years late—for his screenplay. He was not present at the ceremony to collect his award.

The Day of Incident is set in the 7th century, in an unidentified Arab land. Through the love of Rahila, a Muslim girl, a Christian referred to only as Abd Allah converts to Islam. Rahila's father, having rejected Abd Allah 37 times, finally agrees to give him his daughter's hand in marriage. This, however, is met with strong tribal opposition. Despite their reproaches, preparations are made for an elaborate wedding on the ninth of Muharram. The big day arrives but during the celebrations Abd Allah hears a voice asking for help. He asks the guests if anyone had called out for help, but no one else seems to have heard the voice. He keeps on hearing these words: 'Is there anyone who will come to my aid? Tomorrow Christ will be crucified in Naynawa.' Just before the marriage rites are performed, he abruptly leaves the gathering, mounts his horse and gallops towards the desert. This causes a huge stir

amongst the guests – this is clearly an unforgivable insult and a stain on Arab honour and reputation.

On his journey to find Karbala and Husayn, he encounters various people and has to surmount many life-threatening challenges. He finally arrives at the scene of Karbala at noon of the tenth of Muharram. The enemy, however, have already entered Husayn's camp, looting and burning everything, and rejoicing over their victim's dead bodies. They hold spears atop which rest the heads of those they have slain. The place is filled with smoke, dust and shrieks of women and children. Suddenly, two suns appear in the sky and Abd Allah, blinded by the light, cries out that if he were not meant to arrive in time, why was he summoned in the first place? He then blacks out. When he wakes up later, he sees a woman's figure – bound but wrapped in light. She addresses him as *javanmard,* and asks him to return with their message. Abd Allah returns to Rahila's village/town to tell everyone what he saw.

In his book on the performing arts of Iran, Beyzaie states that during Nasir al-Din Shah's reign (1848-1896), when *ta'ziyeh* reached its peak in terms of its artistic and entertainment values, it was divided into two parts: the *pish-vaqe'eh*, or 'before the incident' and the *vaqe'eh* or 'incident' itself. The *pish-vaqe'eh* usually consisted of lighter performances and varied from love stories to satire. It was usually an opportunity to criticise those in positions of power,[33] or to enact stories with titles such as 'Queen Sheba's meeting with Solomon', 'Fatima's attendance at a Quraysh

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[33] This in itself has been argued to have derived from older forms of performing art (*Kuseh-bar neshin* and *Mir-e Nowroozi*) in which people would have an opportunity to criticise the landlords or those under whom they were generally suffering.

wedding', and so on. This was then followed by the *vaqe'eh,* which was three times as long and focused on the events of Karbala (Beyzaie, 2001: 132-133). Thus the *ta'ziyeh* performance would make people laugh and cry at the same time. It was both a joyous and sad occasion.

The title of the film, *Ruz-e vaqe'eh*, can be read as paying homage to these earlier forms of *ta'ziyeh*. The film draws from *pish vaqe'eh* and *vaqe'eh* in *ta'ziyeh*, by starting with a love story. Interestingly the wedding scenes comprise roughly one third of the entire film (27 out of 95 minutes). More importantly, the wedding dances and music with which the film begins are in sharp contrast to the current more sombre forms of commemorating Muharram in modern-day Iran under the Islamic Republic. Like *pish vaqe'eh* in *ta'ziyeh*, the first part of the film provides an opportunity to criticise those who use their privileged social status to inflict injustice on the dispossessed. The *pish vaqe'eh* in *ta'ziyeh* provided the space to criticise the feudal landlords. In *The Day of Incident,* the opponents of Abd Allah's marriage to Rahila are sceptical of his true intentions in converting from Christianity to Islam. They claim that since they have been Muslims for three generations it is beneath them to intermarry with new converts or for that matter with one whose very conversion is under question. The film, therefore, provides a critical look at the Islamic elite of the time. In early Islam, *sabiqa* (priority in Islam) became one of the most important signs of distinction that resulted in the formation of a new Islamic elite within the emerging umma (community) (Kennedy, 1986: 48). Those in Rahila's tribe who consistently question Abd Allah's faith in Islam and regard their three generations of Muslim-ness as a privilege and a licence to marginalise those outside this circle might be seen as subtly satirizing the current Muslim leaders of

Iran who use their position as holders of the 'true interpretation' of Islam as a device to silence all others.

Abd Allah's character also raises interesting issues about Iranian Shi'i identity. His origin and ethnicity remain vague throughout the film, but certain references suggest to the viewer – particularly an Iranian one – that Abd Allah is most likely Iranian. The fact that he is not an Arab is mentioned at several junctures of the film. Even though his conversion is regarded with suspicion by many, he refuses to deny Christ or his own history and identity. This has clear parallels to the Persian conversions after the Arab invasion of Iran in 663. The early Islamic conquests resulted in the political and administrative union of vast regions extending from North Africa to the Persian Empire. Like many other conquered regions during this period, Iran was Islamicised. However, it remained the only territory to resist Arabisation. Similarly, Abd Allah embraces Islam without repudiating everything about his previous identity. Instead, he employs his own vocabulary and existing framework to interpret and understand the new faith.

In the specific context of the rationale for conversion, the Arabs' suspicions about Abd Allah can be compared to the reactions of the early Muslims when faced with early Iranian conversions. Although non-Muslims were not required to convert to Islam after the Muslim conquests, they were nonetheless 'obliged to pay the *jizya,* or poll-tax and so adopt an inferior but secure role in the new order of things' (Kennedy, 1986: 45). Thus, the subsequent conversions of Persians were sometimes interpreted as a tax-evading strategy rather than sincere declarations of faith. A non-Muslim wishing to profess the faith of Islam was only required to pronounce the

shahada three times. Indeed, no other formal procedure was necessary to become Muslim. This simple oral ritual roused the suspicion of many – both Muslims and non-Muslims – about the sincerity of the converts. The Arab tribe alleges that Abd Allah's conversion was just out of his love for Rahila rather than a true profession of faith, but scepticism about his conversion is not limited to his fiancé's Arab tribe, but is shared amongst his own people. Moreover, in the opening scene of the film, a Christian monk asks Abd Allah if indeed he has become an apostate because 'the Arabs are now the conquerors of all conquerors'.

Abd Allah displays all the characteristics of a *javanmard,* a Persian term for a man of integrity who is also brave, noble and chivalrous. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 5, *javanmard* refers to a man possessing the qualities of courage, honour, modesty, humility and rectitude' (Adelkhah, 1999: 30). It has been argued that the idea of *javanmard* is linked with 'a number of rebellions throughout Iran's history' (Adelkhah, 1999: 33). In this context, Adelkhah goes so far as to ask whether the concept of *javanmard* was indeed 'a case of a movement to assert identity, a national resistance movement against Arab occupation?' (1999: 33). If it is, the term *javanmard* stands in stark contrast to the term '*ahl-e Kufeh*', 'the Kufans'. In Persian, this is a metaphor for unfaithful people, derived from specific reference to the Kufans who had invited Imam Husayn to Kufa to liberate them from the oppressive Umayyad caliphate, but then spectacularly failed to stand by their oath of allegiance. The allegory of 'the Kufans' has also been consistently used in the Islamic Republic's propagandist slogans since the early days of the Revolution: 'We

are not the Kufans, for 'Ali to remain alone'.[34] This is yet again another example of how the story of Husayn is used for political agendas.

Abd Allah's response to the call for help is an act of *javanmardi.* Once summoned, regardless of the consequences, he selflessly stands by his oath of allegiance. When he meets the woman enveloped in light – most probably Zaynab, Husayn's sister – she refers to him as *javanmard.* It is she who elucidates Abd Allah's mission. He was summoned not to fight with Husayn, but to bear witness to the tragedy and become the carrier of Husayn's message. Remembering the story of Husayn so that history will not forget his message and sacrifice is an important Shi'i practice. In this context, as we have already discussed in Chapter 3, the martyrdom of Husayn, is a narrative that is deeply rooted within the Shi'i Iranian tradition.

Beyzaie employs the techniques of an older performing art to depict an important religious event. *Ta'ziyeh* informs the narrative structure of *The Day of Incident.* The two distinct parts of the film can be compared to *pish vaqe'eh* and *vaqe'eh* in *ta'ziyeh.* Like *ta'ziyeh,* the film is not just about the martyrdom of Husayn but includes the lighter story of Abd Allah and Rahila's love. This also provides the opportunity to criticise the biases of the privileged just as *ta'ziyeh* would those in positions of power. The film also makes references to Iranian ideals such as *javanmardi,* a value that was incorporated in their religious traditions. It also emphasises the Shi'a obligation of upholding Husayn's message. Thus, Beyzaie does not just enact the events of Karbala on screen. In fact, very little is dedicated to the

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[34] Imam 'Ali, the first Shi'i Imam, who is also Imam Husayn's father, was murdered in the mosque of Kufa by a dissident. 'Ali in the above slogan is also a rhetorical reference to the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic, currently Ali Khamenei.

events of Karbala itself. Instead, he emphasises the impact of Husayn's martyrdom in the lives of the Shi'a and in the formation of their religious identity.

The *ta'ziyeh* motifs are, however, restricted in *The Day of Incident.* The overall dramatic aspects of the film would have certainly looked different had Beyzaie himself directed it. Nonetheless, *The Travellers* (*Mosaferan,* 1992) provided him with the opportunity to write and direct a film that employed many *ta'ziyeh* motifs, even though it was a story set in modern times and not that of the martydom of Husayn.

Narrating a modern tragedy through ta'ziyeh

The Travellers (1992) won six awards in the 10th FIFF in 1992 including the Special Jury Award, the Best Actress in a Leading Role, Best Actress in a Supporting Role, Best Actor in a Supporting Role, Best Cinematography and Best Sound. Beyzaie was nominated for Best Directing and Best Editing but did not win. The simple story of *The Travellers* provides various levels of meaning. It is about a wedding celebration that is tragically turned into a mourning ceremony. Mahtab (the bride's sister), her husband and two sons set out from a city in the north of Iran to attend the wedding in Tehran. They are also carrying the wedding mirror that the family traditionally places on the wedding spread. They are all, however, killed in a road accident. While the news comes as a devastating blow to everyone, the grandmother alone refuses to acknowledge their death. She adamantly awaits their arrival and the mirror they had promised to bring for the wedding. At the grandmother's insistence, the bride finally agrees to change from her mourning clothes into her wedding gown. To

the utter astonishment of the guests, the deceased family enters the house surrounded in an aura of light, with Mahtab carrying the promised mirror.

One of the most striking elements of *ta'ziyeh* is the complete lack of suspense in the story and performance. Both the spectators and the actors know the tragic ending. They know that Imam Husayn and his companions will be killed and his family taken captive. It is, therefore, unimportant to keep this a secret to retain the story's suspense. Similarly, at the beginning of *Travellers,* Mahtab faces the camera and tells the audience that she and her family are on their way to Tehran to attend her sister's wedding. She then goes on to say that none of them will make it, that they will all die, thus giving away the ending of the story right at the beginning of the film. Moreover, like the performance of *ta'ziyeh* and unlike the commonly used shot/reverse camera angle, Mahtab faces the audience and speaks to them directly.[35] The dramatic acting in the film is also a departure from the preferred realist or neo-realist styles in filmmaking. Instead, the acting of the various actors is a tribute to the different traditional performing arts of Iran including *pardeh khani*, *naqqali* and *ta'ziyeh*. The constant circular movements of the camera throughout the film simulate the *ta'ziyeh* arena, which is traditionally a round stage with spectators gathered all around it.

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[35] Some Western productions have used similar modes such as the BBC drama series of Trollope's *He Knew He was Right,* broadcast between mid April and early May 2004. In this drama too, some actors would look at the camera and speak about their innermost feelings and thoughts as well as the courses of actions they were about to take. However, they did not give away the whole story and thus maintained its suspense amongst viewers.

In his literature on the Iranian performing arts, Beyzaie provides a detailed description of how deaths are staged in *ta'ziyeh.* The method of depicting the tragic deaths in *The Travellers* can be compared to the conventions in *ta'ziyeh.* Beyzaie states that in *ta'ziyeh,* the injured actor leaves on horseback, usually followed by a few men. Soon after, the horse returns without its rider but pierced by numerous arrows. The return of the riderless horse is an old metaphor in Persian literature that indicates the rider's death. The actual moment of Imam Husayn's martyrdom is also hidden from the spectators' eyes, even though it occurs on stage. Traditionally, ten people from the opposing army surround the Imam, gradually tightening the circle around him. Suddenly, they throw themselves upon him and freeze in this position. Then the Shimr-reader, who is weeping loudly and inviting the audience too to cry (since he is a Shi'i believer in real life), storms into the middle of the circle and murders the Imam. At this moment, because the Imam cannot be seen even though he is on stage, pigeons are released into the sky. They symbolise both the ascent of the Imam's soul into the heavens and the messengers who carry the news of the Imam's death (Beyzaie, 2001: 140-141).

In *The Travellers*, the exact moment of the tragic deaths is also hidden from the audience. The viewer is aware from very early on in the film that the family will not make it to Tehran. The numerous warning signals are a constant reminder of the unpleasant incident that is about to take place. The car's navigation along the dangerous and twisted roads through mountains that seem to close in on them, the dark tunnel they pass through, the musical cues that constantly change from merry beats to suspenseful tones and, finally, the tanker that approaches the camera threatening a crash but then calmly steers back onto the road, all suggest the

imminence of the incident. It is only after the tanker passes that the audience sees the leak from behind it. The fire and smoke in the next sequence and the traffic lieutenant reporting on the incident all combine to inform the viewer that the fatal accident has indeed occurred. No gory details are shown, nor is there any emphasis on the bodies. Indeed, there is only one quick shot of a draped body. Instead, the tragedy is depicted through the body of the smashed car, empty but with broken and bloodstained windows, just like the riderless horse full of arrows on the *ta'ziyeh* stage.

The audience is also shielded from hearing the news of death, a pattern that is repeated throughout the film. Even when the family is informed of the death of their loved ones, the audience sees only their reaction to the devastating news rather than hearing the news itself. Even though various people give/hear the news of death, these accounts are inaudible to the viewer. Instead, only the dramatic reactions to the news are shown. The men are usually quietly but clearly grief-stricken, the women scream, throw mud on their heads, break mirrors and crystals and tear the curtains in their displays of grief. Only the grandmother calmly refuses to accept the deaths and does not go into mourning.

One of the sequences that best alludes to the *ta'ziyeh* stage is the mourning ceremony held in the family's house. The camera constantly makes circular movements around the guests, suggesting a round stage in the centre of the room. This then becomes the centre stage for various family members, just like the *ta'ziyeh* actors, to make their speeches. When the brothers of the deceased couple give their speeches on death, they define it according to their respective professions – business

and academia. The husband of Zarinkolah, the village woman who had also been in the same taxi, then enters the stage. The performative and melancholic narration of his wife's story is reminiscent of the religious *naqqali*. He narrates his wife's long desire for a child and her constant search for a cure, which ultimately led to her death, for she had been on her way to Tehran to visit yet another fertility clinic. Similarly, when the taxi-driver's wife enters, like the *naqqal* (story-teller), she also gives an emotional account of her husband's story and the misery that had befallen her. In contrast, the traffic lieutenant confidently provides a technical account of the accident, analysing the various logical reasons that might have led to the collision.

Indeed, the family of the deceased can be compared to the *mazlum khan*s (readers of the oppressed) and the truck driver and his assistant to *mukhalif-khan*s (readers of the opposing army) in *ta'ziyeh*. The latter, too, attend the mourning ceremony to pay their respects and beg for forgiveness. Initially, their appearance causes a stir amongst the guests, with the sons of the deceased taxi-driver attacking them. When everyone is finally calmed down, the truck driver and his assistants sit on the floor/stage. They then begin to vociferate how despite their desperate efforts to avoid the accident, the truck had slid on the slippery road and crashed into the taxi. The loud, crude and rough voices of the driver and his assistant and their frequent use of slang and colloquial terms is very similar to the way the *mukhalif khan*s speak in *ta'ziyeh*.

Ta'ziyeh also provides a cathartic release for its spectators, just like the family in *The Travellers*, who do not just grieve the loss of their loved ones, but also lament about their old inner pains. Thus, when mourning the loss of his brother and nephews,

Hekmat sobs to his wife that no more male descendants are left to carry their family name, which will subsequently vanish without a trace. What surfaces, however, is Hekmat's own unhappiness at not being able to have a male child. His wife has borne him two daughters and doctors have advised against another pregnancy as it would put his wife's life at risk. Similarly, the loving relationship between Mastan and Mahu, the bride's brother, is not as perfect as it had appeared. During the mourning ceremony, Mastan faces the camera and announces that they have a disabled child who lives far away from them, and whom they can visit only once a month. The mourning ceremony, just like the *ta'ziyeh* stage, therefore, allows the open—and safe—expression of these strong emotions. The family grieve for their loss, just as *ta'ziyeh* allows spectators to openly grieve not only for Husayn's fate but also their own misfortunes.

The Travellers employs many *ta'ziyeh* forms in narrating its story. The elements of lack of suspense, veiled moments of death, its impact on the bereaved, the circular movements of camera, the delivery of the dialogues and the cathartic nature of the mourning rituals are all comparable to *ta'ziyeh*. Beyzaie employs all these features of *ta'ziyeh* to narrate a modern tragedy. *The Travellers* also allows Beyzaie, who laments the loss of older Iranian forms of performing arts, to employ the medium of film to reintroduce and reinterpret these older traditions to his audience.

In the next section I will explore how Kiarostami, whose style and approach differ dramatically from Beyzaie, engages with *ta'ziyeh* in film. It is not necessarily only the martyrdom of Husayn, but the story of Karbala and the rituals of *ta'ziyeh* that have informed Iranian Shi'i identity and its expressions.

Ta'ziyeh *and its Spectators*

In early May 2005, Abbas Kiarostami staged an installation of the *ta'ziyeh* called '*A Look to Tazieh*' at the London's Victoria and Albert Museum, followed by an 'in-conversation' between him, Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, and Geoff Andrew.[36] The installation consisted of three screens—two large screens on the side and a relatively smaller television screen in the middle. The television screen played scenes of *ta'ziyeh* performed in a remote rural area. The two large screens on the side showed spectators watching *ta'ziyeh*. These were images of men, women and children and they were edited in such a way that their reactions corresponded precisely to the *ta'ziyeh* that was screened on the television screen. The spectators initially begin to watch the play distractedly, talking to each other, having tea, and giggling away. But gradually the drama captivates them, and as the tragedy reaches its climax, many are in tears, some sobbing or beating their chests.

This installation was a departure from Kiarostami's usual filmmaking topics as evident from the analysis in the previous chapter. During the post-screening discussion, he explained his attraction to a topic that would normally not have interested him. The idea was first conceived in 1997 when he was awarded the prestigious Palme d'Or award at the Cannes International Film Festival for his *Taste of Cherry*. When an interviewer at Cannes asked him if the distancing at the end of the film was a Brechtian influence, Kiarostami responded that it was the influence of *ta'ziyeh* rather than Brecht. The director of the Rome Theatre present at that

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[36] Karimi-Hakkak is a Persian studies scholar based in the United States and Geoff Andrew a film critic in Britain.

interview was keen to know more about *ta'ziyeh* and so Kiarostami sent him a tape on his return to Tehran, which ultimately resulted in the installation at the Rome Theatre in 2003.

Kiarostami believes that the primitive *ta'ziyeh* of older times was a much better performance. One could legitimately ask if this arises simply out of his fascination with the older, more primitive, and therefore, exotic aspects of culture and society. He has, in fact, been frequently criticised for his choice of subjects and locations, particularly by some in the Iranian diaspora who read his films as an attempt to win foreign audiences and awards by depicting Iran as 'backward'. This is a view that has time and again been argued about—but it is a discussion that I shall not enter into here. At the very least, the problem with this criticism is that it dismisses the films on the basis of very superficial readings indeed. Instead, I will first look at Kiarostami's discussion of both his experiences of *ta'ziyeh* as a child and his later filmmaking experience, which will allow me to analyse his work better. Kiarostami is a great orator and knows how to engage with his audience. His talk during the discussion was frequently punctuated with outbursts of laughter, particularly from the Iranian audience. Sadly, much of the humour was lost in translation. Here I have noted down excerpts from his talk,[37] which will shed light not only on Kiarostami's interpretation of *ta'ziyeh*, but also on *its* evolution in modern Iran.

> My earliest memory of *ta'ziyeh* was watching it when I was four or five on my father's shoulders. Much has changed in the last 50 years. Like all other things, when there are better facilities the results are far worse. *Ta'ziyeh* has become far more performative and far worse. It was much better when it was performed with the minimum of equipment. I found the *ta'ziyeh* that you just watched in one of the

[37] In my own translations here, I have tried to retain the original humour as much as possible.

remote areas of Iran. Everything in *ta'ziyeh* has become so modern that it has lost the newness, honesty and sincerity which was once present in *ta'ziyeh*.

One of my childhood memories of *ta'ziyeh* is a battle scene between Imam Husayn and [sic]Yazid.[38] The swords they were using must have been made of tinplate, because they were very primitive and flimsy. During the battle, one of the swords got bent. The other one took it from him and straightened it with a stone and handed it back. I was astonished to see that even though they were enemies and fighting with each other, they also enjoyed a friendly relationship. This is an important theme that runs through all *ta'ziyeh*s...The dialogues, for example, bear this interesting duality, something that I picked up through my repetitious viewings of the rushes. In a verse such as *manam ke ba lagad mizanam be sanduq-e 'elm-e ladoni* (It is me who kicks your chest, the chest of divine knowledge) the character acts both as friend and enemy. That is, even though I am kicking you, I also acknowledge that you are the bearer of the divine knowledge.

Kiarostami's later experience of making the *ta'ziyeh* installation was equally if not more fascinating. He stated that he was more interested in the audience watching *ta'ziyeh* than the performance itself. He wanted to know who they were, where they came from, and more importantly, to watch a people that one does not usually get to observe. The main challenge however, was not the presence of the camera in front of the spectators. In fact, he said, they would get so engrossed in the *ta'ziyeh* that they would rarely notice the camera and those behind it would even stretch and position themselves to look over it for a better view of the stage. Instead, it was filming the segregated audience that proved very challenging for Kiarostami. The women who were sitting on the top-floor balcony did not allow the male cameramen to go upstairs. As a result, the only female cameraperson did not record enough footage of the women watching *ta'ziyeh*. When it came to editing, Kiarostami was 40 minutes

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[38] Kiarostami must have meant Shimr, for Yazid the caliph was not present in Karbala, and the battle scenes of *ta'ziya* depict Shimr as the commander of the opposing forces.

short of footage of the female audience. He thought creatively of a resolution to the problem:

> We had to wait for another Muharram, next year. I thought of a solution but wasn't sure if it would work. I transferred all my footage of *ta'ziyeh* onto VHS tape and put my television in the backyard garden and covered the walls with black cloth. Then I asked one of the cleaners that worked in our neighbourhood to bring me some extras who would sit and watch the film, and I could then intersperse their images with my previous footage. I set up the scene and put out the chairs and some 16 of them arrived by minibus. They entered in silence and sat on the chairs and without giving any explanations, I started the VHS player. They began watching the film in my backyard and by minute 40 they started to cry. All the good shots that you just saw of women crying are the ones from my garden!
>
> However, the fact that they were watching it on TV and not 'live' did not take away anything from the reality of the meaning of the process itself. In fact one could see it as an extension of the distancing that occurs in *ta'ziyeh*. It [the mediated form] was no longer important for them. In fact, at some points the sun was so bright that you could barely see anything, but they still continued to cry by just hearing the words. Interestingly, once everything was finished I was embarrassed to pay them. I thought, they've come and cried and I have to say, here is this much for your crying. I had the money in my hand inside my pocket, but not knowing what to do I went to the driver and thanked him and said goodbye to each of them. The woman who was their organiser came up to me and said 'it has come to this much.' I was perplexed, not knowing what was genuine; the crying..., the money...?! Then she also asked for her husband's fees. I said, 'But he wasn't there crying in the garden to which she responded, 'No but he's been waiting here in the minibus!' So he was paid without even crying and I was completely confused!
>
> Then again we were short of footage, so I asked for another 15 new faces. This time the organiser brought 30 women with her, 15 of whom were the old faces. I told her that I had already shot their faces, to which she responded: 'Well, they've come along anyway!' So we sat the old crowd on the side and the new ones in front of the camera. We served them tea and sweets and then got started. After a while I noticed the old ones who didn't have the camera on them were much more emotional and weeping far more than the new batch! [Audience is laughing heartily by now] Whatever I'm saying is the truth! Once they were finished, their organiser came to me and charged

> even for the old group saying that they had done their share of crying anyway! Despite all of this, it is very difficult and complex to find out what is happening in their heads... I didn't say all of this just to make you laugh! I wanted to demonstrate how people are far more complex than it appears...there is so much contradiction in Iran.

Kiarostami's *ta'ziyeh* was produced as a response to Western curiosity about this performing art. His installation is an invitation to look beyond the stage performances, and directs our gaze to the spectators. In fact, Kiarostami's approach to introducing *ta'ziyeh* is a clear departure from the traditional emphasis on the characteristics of script and performance. The larger-than-life images of the spectator, and the relatively smaller screen of the performance itself, make it very clear that he is more interested in the spectators watching *ta'ziyeh* and its effect on them than *ta'ziyeh* itself. It is a statement that defines *ta'ziyeh* as an ensemble, of which the spectators are an integral part. In his own words, 'Ta'ziyeh is strictly linked to its audience - the event is actually created by the rapport between actors and spectators' (quoted in Iran Heritage Foundation, 2005). Kiarostami thus demonstrates that it is this link between the performance and the spectator that makes *ta'ziyeh* very different from any other drama or performance. The men and women who begin watching the play passively—some whispering, talking, giggling or even dozing off—become increasingly active and engaged, sobbing and beating their chests as they approach the epilogue.

Kiarostami's deployment of *ta'ziyeh* in film is not an attempt to preserve or revive this old 'dying' performing art. In fact, he is not interested in a newer, more performative and technically advanced form of *ta'ziyeh*. Rather, he maintains that it is the newness, honesty and sincerity of the old that is lost with the modern

interventions. However, it would be a disservice not to acknowledge the very modern interventions which allow him to capture what he classifies as 'the best female shots of the film' from the paid spectators. The video screening enables him to 're-enact' a performance outside its usual time and space to achieve the desired reactions. Nevertheless, Kiarostami's search for a location in which the *ta'ziyeh* is closer to the 'primitive *ta'ziyeh* of the older times' points to the fact that he, too, even if subconsciously/inadvertently, is trying to capture and hold on to a glimpse of an older tradition that is swiftly evolving and developing into newer forms. In this sense, his installation could be seen as preserving the older performing art. More importantly, however, what Kiarostami captures through his images of the spectators is the continuing impact of the story of Husayn's martyrdom on his Shi'i believers. One of the most powerful narratives in Iran, the story still manages to capture the imagination of its audience, whether present at the performance itself or paid to watch a televised version.

Conclusions

The complexity of the modern Iranian Shi'a points to the problem of dichotomising religious traditions and modernity. Whether it is a *rowzeh* that turns into a mobile ringtone or an underground rap singer who 'updates' the traditional *rowzeh khani* into a rap about Muharram, the boundaries of tradition and modernity, religious and secular are no longer clear-cut. It is no longer possible to define the space for religious traditions as restricted to the mosques and the clergy. Nor are the secular and modern totally separate from religion. Religion finds a new medium of expression through modern secular inventions such as the internet, which allows a

cleric such as Daneshmand to expand his sermons to include a virtual audience. The internet has also enabled Sunni-Shi'a conflict discourse to occupy and engage with a new medium, with each group posting evidence to the heretical character of the other. As shown in this chapter, it is no longer possible to ignore this growing interaction between religious traditions and modernity.

It is within this evolving context of religious traditions that *ta'ziyeh*, which originated in much older pre-Islamic forms of performance, has survived its many centuries of eventful history. It has been condemned by some ulama as unIslamic, endorsed by others, flourished under royal patronage, and been banned and ignored for being 'backward' during the rule of the Pahlavis. It has moved from the greatest performance halls in cities to remote rural plateaus. Thus, the lifeblood of *ta'ziyeh* has historically been held largely in the hands of the religious and ruling authorities and more recently continues to cause concern amongst them for the reputation of religion.

Films provided *ta'ziyeh* with a new space controlled by the artist rather than those in positions of power. The filmmaker Beyzaie employs many *ta'ziyeh* elements, in terms of both form and content, in writing and making his films. In Beyzaie's reinterpretation, *ta'ziyeh* is employed to narrate one of the most powerful Shi'i Iranian narratives. *Ta'ziyeh* informs the narrative structure of *The Day of Incident,* and its motifs are applied to narrate a modern-day tragedy in *The Travellers*. In this way, Beyzaie not only revives the old performing art but also demonstrates its relevance to the modern Iranian imagination. Like *ta'ziyeh,* his films encompass the historical, the mythological, the national and the religious as they relate to Iranian

society and culture. For his part, Kiarostami illustrates in his installation that the idiosyncrasies of *ta'ziyeh* are not limited to its performative aspects but, more importantly, lie in the effect it has on its spectators. What Kiarostami captures through his images of the spectators is the continuing impact of the story of Husayn's martyrdom on his Shi'i believers. One of the most powerful narratives in Iran, the story still manages to capture the imagination of its audience, whether present at the performance or paid to watch a televised version. Both Beyzaie's films and Kiarostami's installation are particularly important in the face of the evolving traditions of the Muharram ceremonies discussed above. They act as a reservoir of a tradition within a context where there is a growing concern about the 'Other's' perception of 'Islamic' practices, which includes the omission of some of these older traditions.

Conclusions

In a gathering on 13th June 2006, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, received 16 of the country's cinema directors as well as the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Hossein Saffar-Harandi, and advised them on the crucial role they play in society. He said:

> The key to the country's progress lies to a considerable extent in the hands of cinematic artists. The reason is that, considering the influential role of this art, those who are involved in the lofty art of cinema are able to foster noble aspirations, eagerness to make progress, motivation, dynamism, self-confidence and adherence to Islamic and national values in society through their cinematic productions and thus play a great role in the country's progress and in the promotion of sublime values in society (quoted in *Awareness Times*, 2006)

Ayatollah Khamenei's address, just like Ayatollah Khomeini's reference to cinema as an educational tool in the early years of the Revolution, as discussed in chapter 4, signifies the continuity of the regime's acknowledgment of the medium's power and significance.

In the context of the socio-political power of media, where images and representation play a significant role in perpetuating or reconstructing various social and political agendas, it is also important to examine the medium's inherent ability to allow for a polyvocality of discourses including those that challenge or debate views. As I discussed in the Introduction, depictions of Muslims and constructions of their 'otherness' within the Western media have stirred vehement debate and resulted in numerous studies. However, it is equally important to study the various

articulations and constructions from within the Muslim context. But what are these Muslim discourses in religion?

During the in-conversation between Abbas Kiarostami, Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak and Geoff Andrew that followed Kiarostami's *ta'ziyeh* installation at the V&A,[39] Karimi-Hakkak asked Kiarostami whether, as an Iranian, as an artist, he personally found the *ta'ziyeh* narrative a little too unsettling, or was it the likes of him, now living in the West, who had grown squeamish. He asked:

> Would you moderate the drama if you had the power to, if it were your choice, to spare the blood and gore or do you think there is something inherently dramatic about the explicit nature of this narrative that moves the crowd to tears? Is it the sight of the blood and the shroud and all that? I ask this because I'd like this genre to continue but I can't think [it appealing] to the new generation; and the reason this has been ghettoised in Iran in the villages and in the lower classes is that the more urban classes are finding it too explicit and not to their tastes.

Kiarostami responded:

> There is so much contradiction in Iran. It is difficult for me to speak here in front of the microphones; it usually causes misunderstanding. We live in a religious society and people often misunderstand me and accuse me of being in favour of religion, which is not at all the case...there are so many contradictions in our country, complex issues. If I say that religion is just superficial and an imposition on the youth, that isn't the case either. Some of my own son's friends, who are very young, are very serious about religion. They fast during Ramazan and observe the religious rituals. It is surprising and difficult to completely understand. It cannot be easily judged. Even if Shajarian [one of the most elite classical singers in Iran] had sung these [folkloric] verses it would have brought tears to people's eyes.

> If I turn the same question to Hakkak it would be a difficult question for him to answer. I noticed him tearing during the screening [of the *ta'ziyeh* installation]. Does that mean he is religious?

Karimi-Hakkak ignores this and turns to the audience to take further questions.

The exchange above is a brief reminder of the difficulties surrounding a definitive explanation of what constitutes religion, who is religious, which members of the social strata endorse a specific religious practice in Iran, and how much one is allowed, or even allows oneself, to publicly express one's views on these topics. As I have explored in the previous chapters, there are different modalities of Shi'i interpretation in Iran, which make it a rich and complex context. These vary from legalistic and formalistic approaches to religion, to more popular discourses and personal interpretations. Each of these modalities are themselves not fixed but have, in fact, evolved over time and been expressed in various forms. Iranian films have engaged with these various interpretations and approaches.

The discussions around what exactly constitutes religion and spirituality in film have been varied and diverse. As discussed, some such as Baugh (1995) and Tatum (1997) have approached the study of film and religion through films with explicit religious references, such as depictions of Jesus and Christ-figures. Others, like May (1982) and Deacy (2001), have emphasised the autonomy of film as an art form, which they argue is inherently open to a religious interpretation. Lyden (2003), on the other hand, suggests that the reception of film, independent of its content, turns it into a religious experience and proposes audience study as the method to study religion in film. Yet others such as Martin (1995), Estess (1995) and Ostwalt (1995) study the medium's engagement with religion by drawing parallels between film and

the arguments of a certain theology. Similarly, Gordon (1995) and Nathanson (2003) argue that parallels can be drawn between the functions of film and mythology. Still another approach (Miles, 1996; Martin, 1995) has been to examine how films perpetuate social and political hegemonies. Bird (1982) studies film as hierophany, suggesting that film styles enable the explorations of the sacred. Finally, there are those who are interested in studying philosophy through film (Falzon, 2002; Litch, 2002) and film itself as philosophy that thinks (Goodenough, 2005).

By synthesising and categorising these approaches within Western academia I not only examined how each of these methods have attempted to study film's engagement with religion and spirituality, but also, and more importantly, how the intersections between them make it impossible to define a distinct and independent approach. Aside from the fluidity of boundaries between these approaches, it also became clear that no single approach can be identified as the one best suited to the study of religion and spirituality in film. Rather, it is the nature of the particular film under study and the angle from which the scholar approaches it, that determines the most appropriate method or methods. This has allowed me to be flexible in my own approach, rather than restrict it to films that could be fitted within a particular method or approach.

Within the Iranian context, too, there are a range of views on what constitutes film's engagement with religion and spirituality. Authorities, academics, religious leaders and critics have all struggled to define the relationship of film with religion and spirituality. Ayatollah Moravveji's treatise (1999) on Islamic jurisprudence and cinema was an exercise in aligning traditional theocratic positions with state laws

and contemporary social practices. Critics such as Maddadpur argued that the very medium of film is incompatible with Islamic religious values. The category of *ma'nagara* cinema introduced in 2005 resulted in heated debates encompassing a wide range of interpretations. As in the case of Western film studies, no one approach can do justice to the numerous possibilities of studying religion and spirituality in Iranian film. What is significant in the Iranian case, however, is that these debates reflect a general recognition of cinema's legitimate participation in discourses on religion and spirituality and, more importantly, film's ability to articulate its own discourse on these topics.

Therefore, in studying how Iranian films have participated and engaged with Shi'i expressions of Islam, I selected three broad themes within Shi'ism and examined how film engaged with them. However, to provide a better understanding of these themes as well as the appeal and development of Shi'ism in Iran, it was important to first locate them within the much larger socio-historical context of Iran. In this way, my analysis of the films in the chapters allocated to each theme also demonstrated an important point: it established how film is a serious medium in the understanding and analyses of current Shi'i religious expressions within Iran that could be placed as part of a much longer conventional discourse on religion and spirituality in this region.

One of the themes that I examined in my study of film's engagement with religion and spirituality was the legalistic approach within Shi'ism. For this, I focused on the role of the Shi'i clergy in Iranian society. My analysis in Chapter 5 revealed a highly complex picture of the Shi'i Iranian clergy, whose political and religious authority

have been historically contested. Indeed, criticisms of clerical power and legitimacy were expressed not only by a small group of secular intellectuals but also, more strikingly, by elements among the clergy. Recently, the Islamic Republic has not only produced some of the most nuanced arguments questioning the legitimacy of *velayat-e faqih* and clerical power over laity, it has also unwittingly produced some of the finest secular intellectual criticism of the doctrine. Many of this latter group originated as allies of the clerical regime.

In examining the current role of the clergy, I demonstrated how the two films that I had selected functioned as parables. Both *The Lizard* (2004) and *Under the Moonlight* (2001) not only depict the world of the clergy in its current form within Iranian society but also include a moral vision of how it ought to be. These filmic discourses evoke the debates of intellectuals who have critically engaged with the doctrines that empower the clergy. I argued that even though the films are critical of the clerics' current position within society, they do not deny their relevance to the believer. In fact, they remain affirmative of the role of religion in one's life. What the films do, however, is to question the legitimacy of the roles that some clergy have taken for themselves in society. As I demonstrated, the films propose an alternative relationship between clergy and laity, suggesting that the formalistic and institutional facets of religion should aim towards fulfilling their ideal role within society. Both these films propose a more fluid relationship between people, the clergy and the Divine, one that is not restricted to the rigid boundaries of seminary debates.

In contrast to the formalistic approach within Shi'ism, the more personal mystical approach was the second theme of my studies of Shi'i expressions. This provided an alternative to the official discourses of the Islamic Republic, which are based primarily in the theological debates of jurisprudents. The allusive language of poetry plays a key role in the way that the mystical approach is able to convey and share some of its perspectives. As discussed in Chapter 3, Sufis argue that reason and intellect alone remain inadequate tools for understanding the Ultimate Reality in its highest form. Instead, notions of the Divine spark, going beyond self, and love, are the guides and inspiration of the soul in its ascent to God. Despite the differences amongst the various Sufi groups, the primary goal of attaining closeness or union with God remains constant throughout Sufism.

In Chapter 6, I studied how Majidi's films reflect some of these core Sufi teachings, such as man's spiritual attainment and his proximity to God. His films provide an alternative view of Iranian Shi'i expressions, which are inspired by the works of great masters such as Rumi, Attar and Jami. Studying Majidi's films also reveals how these literary and poetic forms inform Iranian Shi'i expressions of Islam. In contrast to the theological and legalistic approach, this form of Sufism does not deem formalistic learning and institutions essential to man's spiritual attainment. Eschewing the debate on the legalistic approach, Majidi instead employs the medium of film to explore a few key mystical concepts such as love, suffering and annihilation, and their relevance to the modern-day lives of ordinary people. In all these films, spiritual attainment requires no special rank, distinction or an understanding or study of the traditional sources. The Sufi concepts embedded in the film allow viewers to share in the spiritual experiences of the characters. As I

demonstrated, these films succeed in producing a modern discourse that offers an alternative way of understanding religion and spirituality, but one that is rooted in medieval Iranian mystical interpretations of Islam.

In Chapter 7, I examined how Kiarostami's films are poetic philosophies that contemplate man's existence and its meaning. His approach to religion and spirituality is, in fact, a departure from the conventional approaches discussed above. Even though his films present us with authoritarian accounts of the religious, positivist and sceptic, Kiarostami does not set out to prove the truth or untruth of any of these accounts. Instead, he remains silent to these various articulations and arrives at a poetic way of understanding the mystical. Using the framework of Wittgenstein's philosophy, I demonstrated how Kiarostami's films allude to the mystical by pointing to another way of looking, allowing his audience to arrive at a certain understanding themselves. Therefore, by focusing on the question of life and death in his films, I argued how his films are 'thinking texts' that employ the lyrical language of Iranian poets but do not aim to demonstrate existing philosophies. Rather, they invite us to rethink our preconceptions and look afresh at life. Kiarostami's 'thinking' films are important in that they not only contemplate all these various approaches, but also go beyond them to provide a vision of an alternative discourse on religion and spirituality in Iran today.

Having examined film's engagement with the formalistic and mystical approaches, Chapter 8 was a study of films' engagement with popular discourses. This became the third theme of my study of Shi'i expressions of Islam in Iran. I selected the narrative of Husayn with a focus on *ta'ziyeh*. As I discussed in Chapter 4, the

narrative of Husayn has historically played a pivotal role in the formation of Shi'i identity. Husayn's martyrdom has turned him into one of the greatest mythical figures of Iranian narratives, a narrative that has been variously appropriated by different factions at different times. These have ranged from commemorative processions and the religious ceremonies of *rowzeh khani* to Khomeini's anti-Shah slogans.

Examining *ta'ziyeh*'s eventful history shows that this performing art has at various times been faced with resistance from different factions including the Iranian clergy and the monarchy as well as intellectuals. As I demonstrated through an analysis of Beyzaie's and Kiarostami's respective engagement with *ta'ziyeh* in their films, their reinterpretation of this older form of performing art has, even if inadvertently, reintroduced this dying art form to their audiences through a new medium. Thus, in the face of the increasing pressures on *ta'ziyeh* as well as the evolving traditions of Muharram more generally, these films act not only as a cultural reservoir for a threatened tradition, but also more importantly, endow it with new life.

Overall, I have employed an array of source materials in my research, all of which have enriched my findings. These include religious treatises, music, speeches and videos. I have studied the different articulations of what constitutes religion and spirituality in film within Western scholarship as well as Iranian discourses. Having highlighted the problems of constraining oneself to a particular approach or listing conventional criteria that would qualify a film as 'religious' or 'spiritual', I went on to explore how films have engaged with different Shi'i expressions in Islam. For this, I focused on official and formalistic religious discourses, the more Sufi and

mystical approaches, a philosophical approach as well as popular discourses within Shi'i Islam in Iran. In short, I aimed to understand the recent articulations of Iranian Shi'a Islam through the medium of film as articulated by these Muslims themselves. In this regard, I believe that this study presents a creative approach to understanding contemporary articulations on religion and spirituality in Iran.

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